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SEVEN JOURNEYS TO TOMORROW BY MASTERS OF SCIENCE FICTION

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J. F. Bone, THE SCENTS OF IT

Arthur C. Clarke, REUNION

James E. Gunn, THE TECHNOLOGICAL
REVOLUTION

William F. Nolan, GORF! GORF! GORF!

K. M. O'Donnell, ELEPHANTS

and

Robert Silverberg, IN ENTROPY'S JAWS

plus

five more looks at the light and the dark sides of the future . . .
at the infinite worlds of science fiction



Infinity Two

Edited by Robert Hoskins

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The Technological Revolution

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Introduction:

THE ALIEN AMONG US

Man is a waster. As conditions permit, his consumption of energy expands, at an exponential rate, far beyond the needs of simple life support. With every new development of technology, there is a corresponding increase in the consumption of energy . . . but the end is in sight. And the technologically oriented societies of the industrialized east and west are finally beginning to worry about that approaching end.

This year, ecology is the catch phrase—ecology, and pollution. This, in a society that has been taught to believe that man's greatest advances came only with the constant development of technology. People whose only knowledge of the planetary life support system was in the realization of hunger, or thirst, are worrying about the end result of industrial pollution and waste.

Industry is the villain, they think; all sins and ills of our modern society can be laid to industry's demands. But industry is only people . . . and people are the race of man. The destruction of this planet's ecological balance cannot and will not be stopped until every single individual learns that wasting, littering, spilling effluent into waterways, and the unnecessary consumption of energy, is a crime against life.

And this will never happen. For no matter what steps society takes to protect itself, there will always be the

wasters, the spoilers, the destroyers of the environment. It is as though man carried within him an urge to self-destruction, a deliberate need to suicide. A death wish, if you will honor the Freudian concept.

But why should this be? Our planet is a pleasant world, and our race well-adapted to its extremes and means of climate and topography. Indeed, primitive man may well have known a form of planetary paradise. Why is our race so hell-bent on the final and total destruction of this globe?

Could it be that man is a possessed race?

The concept belongs properly in the realm of science fiction, where it has received occasional serious treatment . . . but perhaps it's time to dust off the fictional elements of the concept, and treat it more seriously. There appears to be something in the makeup of certain people that forces them to self-destruction. At times, this means the destruction of those around them, those they may love, or for whom they may feel strong social-moral attachments. Every thinking man knows that wasting and pollution is wrong . . . yet many of us go right on, wasting and polluting, with never an active thought for the consequences of our particular acts.

Not all; some people are morally strong enough to overcome the inclination towards self-destruction. But enough are so inclined to be wasters, that we should give credence to the idea that they are controlled by a force stronger than themselves.

Perhaps life is an accident, a regretted error. It may be that nature is trying to rectify it's mistake.

Someone is certainly doing something.

This year, it's ecology and pollution. Next year . . .
The end?

—Robert Hoskins

For every beginning there is an ending; every journey a destination. We look always to the promise of tomorrow . . . or is it all a lie?

MURPHY'S HALL

Poul and Karen Anderson

This is a lie, but I wish so much it were not.

Pain struck through like lightning. For an instant that went on and on, there was nothing but the fire which hollowed out his breast and the body's animal terror. Then as he whirled downward he knew:

Oh, no! Must I
leave them already?

Only a month,
a month.

Weltall, verweile doch, du bist so schon.

The monstrous thunders and whistles became a tone, like a bell struck once which would not stop singing. It filled the jagged darkness, it drowned all else, until it began to die out, or to vanish into the endless, century after century, and meanwhile the night deepened and softened, until he had peace.

But he opened himself again and was in a place long and high. With his not-eyes he saw that five hundred and forty doors gave onto black immensities wherein dwelt clouds of light. Some of the clouds were bringing suns to birth. Others, greater and more distant, were made of suns already created, and turned in majestic Catherine's wheels. The nearest stars cast out streamers of flame, lan-

ces of radiance; and they were diamond, amethyst, emerald, topaz, ruby; and around them swung glints which he knew with his not-brain were planets. His not-ears heard the thin violence of cosmic-ray sleet, the rumble of solar storms, the slow patient multiplex pulses of gravitational tides. His not-flesh shared the warmth, the blood-beat, the megayears of marvelous life on uncountable worlds.

Six stood waiting. He rose. "But you—" he stammered without a voice.

"Welcome," Ed greeted him. "Don't be surprised. You were always one of us."

They talked quietly, until at last Gus reminded them that even here they were not masters of time. Eternity, yes, but not time. "Best we move on," he suggested.

"Uh-huh," Roger said. "Especially after Murphy took this much trouble on our account."

"He does not appear to be a bad fellow," Yuri said.

"I am not certain," Vladimir answered. "Nor am I certain that we ever will find out. But come, friends. The hour is near."

Seven, they departed the hall and hastened down the star paths. Often the newcomer was tempted to look more closely at something he had glimpsed. But he recalled that, while the universe was inexhaustible of wonders, it would have only the single moment to which he was being guided.

They stood after a while on a great ashen plain. The outlook was as eerily beautiful as he had hoped—no, more, when Earth, a blue serenity swirled white with weather, shone overhead: Earth, whence had come the shape that now climbed down a ladder of fire.

Yuri took Konstantin's hand in the Russian way. "Thank you," he said through tears.

But Konstantin bowed in turn, very deeply, to Willy.

And they stood in the long Lunar shadows, under the high Lunar heaven, and saw the awkward thing come to

rest and heard: "Houston, Tranquillity Base here. The Eagle has landed."

Stars are small and dim on Earth. Oh, I guess they're pretty bright still on a winter mountaintop. I remember when I was little, we'd saved till we had the admission fees and went to Grand Canyon Reserve and camped out. Never saw that many stars. And it was like you could see up and up between them—like, you know, you could *feel* how they weren't the same distance off, and the spaces between were more huge than you could imagine. Earth and its people were just lost, just a speck of nothing among those cold sharp stars. Dad said they weren't too different from what you saw in space, except for being a lot fewer. The air was chilly too, and had a kind of pureness, and a sweet smell from the pines around. Way off I heard a coyote yip. The sound had plenty of room to travel in.

But I'm back where people live. The smog's not bad on this rooftop lookout, though I wish I didn't have to breathe what's gone through a couple million pairs of lungs before it reaches me. Thick and greasy. The city noise isn't too bad either, the usual growling and screeching, a jet-blast or a burst of gunfire. And since the power shortage brought on the brownout, you can generally see stars after dark, sort of.

My main wish is that we lived in the southern hemisphere, where you can see Alpha Centauri.

Dad, what are you doing tonight in Murphy's Hall?

A joke. I know. Murphy's Law: "Anything that can go wrong, will." Only I think it's a true joke. I mean, I've read every book and watched every tape I could lay hands on, the history, how the discoverers went out, further and further, lifetime after lifetime. I used to tell myself stories about the parts that nobody lived to put into a book.

The crater wall had fangs. They stood sharp and grayish white in the cruel sunlight, against the shadow which brimmed the bowl. And they grew and grew. Tumbling while it fell, the spacecraft had none of the restfulness of zero weight. Forces caught nauseatingly at gullet and gut. An unidentified loose object clattered behind the pilot chairs. The ventilators had stopped their whickering and the two men breathed stench. No matter. This wasn't an Apollo 13 mishap. They wouldn't have time to smother in their own exhalations.

Jack Bredon croaked into the transmitter: "Hello, Mission Control . . . Lunar Relay Satellite . . . anybody. Do you read us? Is the radio out too? Or just our receiver? God damn it, can't we even say goodbye to our wives?"

"Tell 'em quick," Sam Washburn ordered. "Maybe they'll hear."

Jack dabbed futilely at the sweat that broke from his face and danced in glittering droplets before him. "Listen," he said. "This is Moseley Expedition One. Our motors stopped functioning simultaneously, about two minutes after we commenced deceleration. The trouble must be in the fuel feed integrator. I suspect a magnetic surge, possibly due a short circuit in the power supply. The meters registered a surge before we lost thrust. Get that system redesigned! Tell our wives and kids we love them."

He stopped. The teeth of the crater filled the entire forward window. Sam's teeth filled his countenance, a stretched-out grin. "How do you like that?" he said. "And me the first black astronaut."

They struck.

When they opened themselves again, in the hall, and knew where they were, he said, "Wonder if he'll let us go out exploring."

Murphy's Halt? Is that the real name?

Dad used to shout, "Murphy take it!" when he blew his temper. The rest is in a few of the old tapes, fiction plays about spacemen, back when people liked to watch that kind of story. They'd say when a man had died, "He's drinking in Murphy's Hall." Or he's dancing or sleeping or frying or freezing or whatever it was. But did they really say "Hall"? The tapes are old. Nobody's been interested to copy them off on fresh plastic, not for a hundred years, I guess, maybe two hundred. The holographs are blurred and streaky, the sounds are mashed and full of random buzzes. Murphy's Law has sure been working on those tapes.

I wish I'd asked Dad what the astronauts said and believed, way back when they were conquering the planets. Or pretended to believe, I should say. Of course they never thought there was a Murphy who kept a place where the spacefolk went that he'd called to him. But they might have kidded around about it. Only was the idea, for sure, about a hall? Or was that only the way I heard? I wish I'd asked Dad. But he wasn't home often, these last years, what with helping build and test his ship. And when he did come, I could see how he mainly wanted to be with Mother. And when he and I were together, well, that was always too exciting for me to remember those yarns I'd tell myself before I slept, after he was gone again.

Murphy's Haul?

By the time Moshe Silverman had finished writing his report, the temperature in the dome was about seventy, and rising fast enough that it should reach a hundred inside another Earth day. Of course, water wouldn't then boil at once; extra energy is needed for vaporization. But the staff would no longer be able to cool some down to drinking temperature by the crude evaporation apparatus they had rigged. They'd dehydrate fast. Moshe sat naked in a running river of sweat.

At least he had electric light. The fuel cells, insufficient to operate the air conditioning system, would at least keep Sofia from dying in the dark.

His head ached and his ears buzzed. Occasional dizziness seized him. He gagged on the warm fluid he must continually drink. *And no more salt*, he thought. *Maybe that will kill us before the heat does, the simmering, still, stifling heat.* His bones felt heavy, though Venus has in fact a somewhat lesser pull than Earth; his muscles sagged and he smelled the reek of his own disintegration.

Forcing himself to concentrate, he checked what he had written, a dry factual account of the breakdown of the reactor. The next expedition would read what this thick, poisonous inferno of an atmosphere did to graphite in combination with free neutrons; and the engineers could work out proper precautions.

In sudden fury, Moshe seized his brush and scrawled at the bottom of the metal sheet: "Don't give up! Don't let this hellhole whip you! We have too much to learn here."

A touch on his shoulder brought him jerkily around and onto his feet. Sofia Chiappellone had entered the office. Even now, with physical desire roasted out of him and she wetly agleam, puffy-faced, sunken-eyed, hair plastered lank to drooping head, he found her lovely.

"Aren't you through, darling?" Her tone was dull but her hand sought his. "We're better off in the main room. Mohandas' punkah arrangement does help."

"Yes, I'm coming."

"Kiss me first. Share the salt on me."

Afterward she looked over his report. "Do you believe they will try any further?" she asked. "Materials so scarce and expensive since the war—"

"If they don't," he answered, "I have a feeling—oh, crazy, I know, but why should we not be crazy?—I think if they don't, more than our bones will stay here. Our souls will, waiting for the ships that never come."

She actually shivered, and urged him toward their comrades.

Maybe I should go back inside. Mother might need me. She cries a lot, still. Crying, all alone in our little apartment. But maybe she'd rather not have me around. What can a gawky, pimply-faced fourteen-year-old boy do?

What can he do when he grows up?

O Dad, big brave Dad, I want to follow you. Even to Murphy's . . . Hold?

Director Saburo Murakami had stood behind the table in the commons and met their eyes, pair by pair. For a while silence had pressed inward. The bright colors and amateurish figures in the mural that Georgios Efthimakis had painted for pleasure—beings that never were, nymphs and fauns and centaurs frolicking beneath an unsmoky sky, beside a bright river, among grasses and laurel trees and daisies of an Earth that no longer was—became suddenly grotesque, infinitely alien. He heard his heart knocking. Twice he must swallow before he had enough moisture in his mouth to move his wooden tongue.

But when he began his speech, the words came forth steadily, if a trifle flat and cold. That was no surprise. He had lain awake the whole night rehearsing them.

“Yousouf Yacoub reports that he has definitely succeeded in checking the pseudovirus. This is not a cure; such must await laboratory research. Our algae will remain scant and sickly until the next supply ship brings us a new stock. I will radio Cosmocontrol, explaining the need. They will have ample time on Earth to prepare. You remember the ship is scheduled to leave at . . . at a date to bring it here in about nine months. Meanwhile we are guaranteed a rate of oxygen renewal sufficient to keep us alive, though weak, if we do not exert ourselves.

Have I stated the matter correctly, Yousouf?"

The Arab nodded. His own Spanish had taken on a denser accent, and a tic played puppetmaster with his right eye. "Will you not request a special ship?" he demanded.

"No," Saburo told them. "You are aware how expensive anything but an optimum Hohmann orbit is. That alone would wipe out the profit from this station—permanently, I fear, because of financing costs. Likewise would our idleness for nine months."

He leaned forward, supporting his weight easily on fingertips in the low Martian gravity. "That is what I wish to discuss today," he said. "Interest rates represent competition for money. Money represents human labor and natural resources. This is true regardless of socioeconomic arrangements. You know how desperately short they are of both labor and resources on Earth. Yes, many billions of hands—but because of massive poverty, too few educated brains. Think back to what a political struggle the Foundation had before this base could be established.

"We know what we are here for. To explore. To learn. To make man's first permanent home outside Earth and Luna. In the end, in the persons of our great-grandchildren, to give Mars air men can breathe, water they can drink, green fields and forests where their souls will have room to grow." He gestured at the mural, though it seemed more than ever jeering. "We cannot expect starvelings on Earth, or those who speak for them, to believe this is good. Not when each ship bears away metal and fuel and engineering skill that might have gone to keep *their* children alive a while longer. We justify our continued presence here solely by mining the fissionables. The energy this gives back to the tottering economy, over and above what we take out, is the profit."

He drew a breath of stale, metallic-smelling air. Anoxia

made his head whirl. Somehow he stayed erect and continued:

"I believe we, in this tiny solitary settlement, are the last hope for man remaining in space. If we are maintained until we have become fully self-supporting, Syrtis Harbor will be the seedbed of the future. If not—"

He had planned more of an exhortation before reaching the climax, but his lungs were too starved, his pulse too fluttery. He gripped the table edge and said through flying rags of darkness: "There will be oxygen for half of us to keep on after a fashion. By suspending their other projects and working exclusively in the mines, they can produce enough uranium and thorium so that the books at least show no net economic loss. The sacrifice will . . . will be . . . of propaganda value. I call for male volunteers, or we can cast lots, or— Naturally, I myself am the first."

—That had been yesterday.

Saburo was among those who elected to go alone, rather than in a group. He didn't care for hymns about human solidarity; his dream was that someday those who bore some of his and Alice's chromosomes would not need solidarity. It was perhaps well she had already died in a cinderslip. The scene with their children had been as much as he could endure.

He crossed Weinbaum Ridge but stopped when the dome-cluster was out of sight. He must not make the searchers come too far. If nothing else, a quick duststorm might cover his tracks, and he might never be found. Someone could make good use of his airsuit. Almost as good use as the alga tanks could of his body.

For a time, then, he stood looking. The mountainside ran in dark scaurs and fantastically carved pinnacles, down to the softly red-gold-ocher-black-dappled plain. A crater on the near horizon rose out of its own blue shadow like a challenge to the deep purple sky. In this thin air—he could just hear the wind's ghostly whistle—

Mars gave to his gaze every aspect of itself, diamond sharp, a beauty strong, subtle, and abstract as a torii gate before a rock garden. When he glanced away from the shrunken but dazzling-bright sun, he could see stars.

He felt at peace, almost happy. Perhaps the cause was simply that now, after weeks, he had a full ration of oxygen.

I oughtn't to waste it, though, he thought. He was pleased by the steadiness of his fingers when he closed the valve.

Then he was surprised that his unbelieving self bowed over both hands to the Lodestar and said, "*Namu Amida Butsu.*"

He opened his faceplate.

That is a gentle death. You are unconscious within thirty seconds.

—He opened himself and did not know where he was. An enormous room whose doorways framed a night heaven riotous with suns, galaxies, the green mysterious shimmer of nebulae? Or a still more huge ship, outward bound so fast that it was as if the Milky Way foamed along the bow and swirled aft in a wake of silver and planets?

Others were here, gathered about a high seat at the far end of where-he-was, vague in the twilight cast by sheer distance. Saburo rose and moved in their direction. Maybe, maybe Alice was among them.

But was he right to leave Mother that much alone?

I remember her when we got the news. On a Wednesday, when I was free, and I'd been out by the dump playing ball. I may as well admit to myself, I don't like some of the guys. But you have to take whoever the school staggering throws up for you. Or do you want to run around by yourself (remember, no, don't remember what the Hurricane Gang did to Danny) or stay always by yourself in the patrolled areas? So Jake-

Jake does throw his weight around, so he does set the dues too high, his drill and leadership sure paid off when the Weasels jumped us last year. They won't try that again—we killed three, count 'em, three! —and I sort of think no other bunch will either.

She used to be real pretty, Mother did. I've seen pictures. She's gotten kind of scrawny, worrying about Dad, I guess, and about how to get along after that last pay cut they screwed the spacefolk with. But when I came in and saw her sitting, not on the sofa but on the carpet, the dingy gray carpet, crying— She hung onto that sofa the way she'd hung on Dad.

But why did she have to be so angry at him too? I mean, what happened wasn't his fault.

"Fifty billion munits!" she screamed when we'd started trying to talk about the thing. "That's a hundred, two hundred billion meals for hungry children! But what did they spend it on? Killing twelve men!"

"Aw, now, wait," I was saying, "Dad explained that. The resources involved, uh, aren't identical," when she slapped me and yelled:

"You'd like to go the same way, wouldn't you? Thank God, it almost makes his death worthwhile that you won't!"

I shouldn't have got mad. I shouldn't have said, "Y-y-you want me to become . . . a desk pilot, a food engineer, a doctor . . . something nice and safe and in demand . . . and keep you the way you wanted he should keep you?"

I better stop beating this rail. My fist'll be no good if I don't. Oh, someday I'll find how to make up those words to her.

I'd better not go in just yet.

But the trouble *wasn't* Dad's fault. If things had worked out right, why, we'd be headed for Alpha Centauri in a couple of years. Her and him and me— The planets yonderward, sure, they're the real treasure. But

the ship itself! I remember Jake-Jake telling me I'd be dead of boredom inside six months. "Bored aboard, haw, haw, haw!" He really is a lardbrain. A good leader, I guess, but a lardbrain at heart—hey, once Mother would have laughed to hear me say that—How could you get tired of Dad's ship? A million books and tapes, a hundred of the brightest and most alive people who ever walked a deck—

Why, the trip would be like the revels in Elf Hill that Mother used to read me about when I was small, those old, old stories, the flutes and fiddles, bright clothes, food, drink, dancing, girls sweet in the moonlight. . . .

Murphy's Hill?

From Ganymede, Jupiter shows fifteen times as broad as Luna seen from Earth; and however far away the sun, the king planet reflects so brilliantly that it casts more than fifty times the radiance that the brightest night of man's home will ever know.

"*Here is man's home,*" Catalina Sanchez murmured.

Arne Jensen cast her a look which lingered. She was fair to see in the goldenness streaming through the conservatory's clear walls. He ventured to put an arm about her waist. She sighed and leaned against him. They were scantily clad—the colony favored brief though colorful indoor garments—and he felt the warmth and silkiness of her. Among the manifold perfumes of blossoms (on plants everywhere to right and left and behind, extravagantly tall stalks and big flowers of every possible hue and some you would swear were impossible, dreamlike catenaries of vines and labyrinths of creepers) he caught her summery odor.

The sun was down and Jupiter close to the full. While the terraforming project was going rapidly ahead, as yet the satellite had too little air to blur vision. Tawny shone that shield, emblazoned with slowly moving cloud-bands that were green, blue, orange, umber, and with the

jewel-like Red Spot. To know that a single one of the storms raging there could swallow Earth whole added majesty to beauty and serenity. A few stars had the brilliance to pierce that luminousness, down by the rugged horizon. The gold poured soft across crags, cliffs, craters, glaciers, and the machines that would claim this world for man.

Outside lay a great quietness, but here music lilted from the ballroom. Folk had reason to celebrate. The newest electrolysis plant had gone into operation and was releasing oxygen at a rate fifteen percent above estimate. However, low-weight or no, you got tired dancing—since Ganymedean steps took advantage, soaring and bounding aloft—mirth bubbled like champagne and the girl you admired said yes, she was in a mood for Jupiter watching—

"I hope you're right," Arne said. "Less on our account—we have a good, happy life, fascinating work, the best of company—than on our children's." He squeezed a bit harder.

She didn't object. "How can we fail?" she answered. "We've become better than self-sufficient. We produce a surplus, to trade to Earth, Luna, Mars, or plow directly back into development. The growth is exponential." She smiled. "You must think I'm awfully professorish. Still, really, what can go wrong?"

"I don't know," he said. "War, overpopulation, environmental degradation—"

"Don't be a gloomy," Cataline chided him. The lambent light struck rainbows from the tiara of native crystal that she wore in her hair. "People can learn. They needn't make the same mistakes forever. We'll build paradise here. A strange sort of paradise, yes, where trees soar into a sky full of Jupiter, and waterfalls tumble slowly, slowly down into deep-blue lakes, and birds fly like tiny bright-colored bullets, and deer cross the meadows in ten-meter leaps . . . but paradise."

"Not perfect," he said. "Nothing is."

"No, and we wouldn't wish that," she agreed. "We want some discontent left to keep minds active, keep them hankering for the stars." She chuckled. "I'm sure history will find ways to make them believe things could be better elsewhere. Or nature will— Oh!"

Her eyes widened. A hand went to her mouth. And then, frantically, she was kissing him, and he her, and they were clasping and feeling each other while the waltz melody sparkled and the flowers breathed and Jupiter's glory cataracted over them uncaring whether they existed.

He tasted tears on her mouth. "Let's go dancing," she begged. "Let's dance till we drop."

"Surely," he promised, and led her back to the ballroom.

It would help them once more forget the giant meteoroid, among the many which the planet sucked in from the Belt, that had plowed into grim and marginal Outpost Ganymede precisely half a decade before the Martian colony was discontinued.

Well, I guess people don't learn. They breed, and fight, and devour, and pollute, till:

Mother: "We can't afford it."

Dad: "We can't not afford it."

Mother: "Those children—like goblins, like ghosts, from starvation. If Tad were one of them, and somebody said never mind him, we have to build an interstellar ship . . . I wonder how you would react."

Dad: "I don't know. But I do know this is our last chance. We'll be operating on a broken shoestring as is, compared to what we need to do the thing right. If they hadn't made that breakthrough at Lunar Hydromagnetics Lab, when the government was on the point of closing it down— Anyway, darling, that's why I'll have to put in plenty of time aboard myself, while the ship is

built and tested. My entire gang will be on triple duty."

Mother: "Suppose you succeed. Suppose you do get your precious spacecraft that can travel almost as fast as light. Do you imagine for an instant it can—an armada can ease life an atom's worth for mankind?"

Dad: "Well, several score atoms' worth. Starting with you and Tad and me."

Mother: "I'd feel a monster, safe and comfortable en route to a new world while behind me they huddled in poverty by the billions."

Dad: "My first duty is to you two. However, let's leave that aside. Let's think about man as a whole. What is he? A beast that is born, grubs around, copulates, quarrels, and dies. Uh-huh. But sometimes something more in addition. He does breed his occasional Jesus, Leonardo, Bach, Jefferson, Einstein, Armstrong, Olveida—whatever you think best justifies our being here—doesn't he? Well, when you huddle people together like rats, they soon behave like rats. What then of the spirit? I tell you, if we don't make a fresh start, a bare handful of us free folk whose descendants may in the end come back and teach—if we don't, why, who cares whether the two-legged animal goes on for another million years or becomes extinct in a hundred? Humanness will be dead."

Me: "And gosh, Mother, the fun!"

Mother: "You don't understand, dear."

Dad: "Quiet. The man-child speaks. He understands better than you."

Quarrel: till I run from them crying. Well, eight or nine years old. That night, was that the first night I started telling myself stories about Murphy's Hall?

It is Murphy's Hall. I say that's the right place for Dad to be.

When Hoo Fong, chief engineer, brought the news to the captain's cabin, the captain sat still for minutes. The ship thrummed around them; they felt it faintly, a song

in their bones. And the light fell from the overhead, into a spacious and gracious room, furnishings, books, a stunning photograph of the Andromeda galaxy, an animation of Mary and Tad; and weight was steady underfoot, a full gee of acceleration, one light-year per year per year, though this would become more in shipboard time as you started to harvest the rewards of relativity . . . a mere two decades to the center of this galaxy, three to the neighbor whose portrait you adored. . . . How hard to grasp that you were dead!

"But the ramscoop is obviously functional," said the captain, hearing his pedantic phrasing.

Hoo Fong shrugged. "It will not be, after the radiation has affected electronic parts. We have no prospect of decelerating and returning home at low velocity before both we and the ship have taken a destructive dose."

Interstellar hydrogen, an atom or so in a cubic centimeter, raw vacuum to Earthdwellers at the bottom of their ocean of gas and smoke and stench and carcinogens. To spacefolk, fuel, reaction mass, a way to the stars, once you're up to the modest pace at which you meet enough of those atoms per second. However, your force screens must protect you from them, else they strike the hull and spit gamma rays like a witch's curse.

"We've hardly reached one-fourth c ," the captain protested. "Unmanned probes had no trouble at better than ninety-nine percent."

"Evidently the system is inadequate for the larger mass of this ship," the engineer answered. "We should have made its first complete test flight unmanned too."

"You know we didn't have funds to develop the robots for that."

"We can send our data back. The next expedition—"

"I doubt there'll be any. Yes, yes, we'll beam the word home. And then, I suppose, keep going. Four weeks, did you say, till the radiation sickness gets bad? The problem

is not how to tell Earth, but how to tell the rest of the men."

Afterward, alone with the pictures of Andromeda, Mary, and Tad, the captain thought: *I've lost more than the years ahead. I've lost the years behind, that we might have had together.*

What shall I say to you? That I tried and failed and am sorry? But am I? At this hour I don't want to lie, most especially not to you three.

Did I do right?

Yes.

No.

O God, oh, shit, how can I tell? The moon is rising above the soot-clouds. I might make it that far. Commissioner Wenig was talking about how we should maintain the last Lunar base another few years, till industry can find a substitute for those giant molecules they make there. But wasn't the Premier of United Africa saying those industries ought to be forbidden, they're too wasteful, and any country that keeps them going is an enemy of the human race?

Gunfire rattles in the streets. Some female voice somewhere is screaming.

I've got to get Mother out of here. That's the last thing I can do for Dad.

After ten years of studying to be a food engineer or a doctor, I'll probably feel too tired to care about the moon. After another ten years of being a desk pilot and getting fat, I'll probably be outraged at any proposal to spend my tax money—

—except maybe for defense. In Siberia they're preaching that strange new missionary religion. And the President of Europe has said that if necessary, his government will denounce the ban on nuclear weapons.

The ship passed among the stars bearing a crew of dead bones. After a hundred billion years it crossed the Edge—not the edge of space or time, which does not exist, but the Edge—and came to harbor at Murphy's Hall.

And the dust which the cosmic rays had made began to stir, and gathered itself back into bones; and from the radiation-corroded skeleton of the ship crept atoms which formed into flesh; and the captain and his men awoke. They opened themselves and looked upon the suns that went blazing and streaming overhead.

"We're home," said the captain.

Proud at the head of his men, he strode uphill from the dock, toward the hall of the five hundred and forty doors. Comets flitted past him, novae exploded in dreadful glory, planets turned and querned, the clinker of a once living world drifted by, new life screamed its outrage at being born.

The roofs of the house lifted like mountains against night and the light-clouds. The ends of rafters jutted beyond the eaves, carved into dragon heads. Through the doorway toward which the captain led his crew, eight hundred men could have marched abreast. But a single form waited to greet them; and beyond him was darkness.

When the captain saw who that was, he bowed very deeply.

The other took his hand. "We have been waiting," he said.

The captain's heart sprang. "Mary too?"

"Yes, of course. Everyone."

Me. And you. And you. And you in the future, if you exist. In the end, Murphy's Law gets us all. But we, my friends, must go to him the hard way. Our luck didn't run out. Instead, the decision that could be made was made. It was decided for us that our race—among the

trillions which must be out there wondering what lies beyond their skies—is not supposed to have either discipline or dreams. No, our job is to make everybody nice and safe and equal, and if this happens to be impossible, then nothing else matters.

If I went to that place—and I'm glad that this is a lie—I'd keep remembering what we might have done and seen and known and been and loved.

Murphy's Hell.

In physics, power can be defined as unused but usable energy—but can power to the people be described strictly as a physical reaction . . . ?

THE MONSTER IN THE CLEARING

Michael Fayette

The computer console glistened wetly from the morning dew as it sat quietly in the forest clearing. Two nude figures, one male, one female, kneeled in front of it, their heads bowed reverently forward.

"I," said the computer, with a metallic clicking, "am God. You both realize that, of course."

"Naturally," said Adam.

"Right on," said Eve.

The computer contemplated quietly for a moment, judging their replies. Finally, the equivalent of a chuckle was emitted from behind a metallic grill. "Then you both agree to go along with the whole God worship thing? You know, I am the Diety, I can do no wrong, you'll both follow my orders—the whole religion bit."

"Naturally," said Adam.

"Right on," said Eve.

"Good," said the computer, "I'm glad we got that out of the way. Now maybe we can get down to some serious business. You both know that you humans really screwed things up the last time, don't you?"

"Naturally," said Adam.

"Right on," said Eve.

"And I don't suppose either one of you know exactly why things all blew up, either?"

Adam looked at Eve uncomprehendingly. Then they both looked shamefully down at the knee-high grass in the clearing and shook their heads. White, puffy clouds moved through the sky above them.

"That's just about what I figured," said the computer with a self-satisfied clank of metal on metal. "Typical human ignorance. Abysmal. It was really something of a miracle that you all survived as long as you did. And such hatred among your own kind! It was all absolutely horrifying, you know."

"Naturally," said Adam.

"Right on," said Eve.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," said the computer, somewhat metallically.

"But that's all over and done with now, thank God. Now we can settle down and start all over again from scratch, so to speak, and avoid all of the idiotic mistakes you humans made the first time around. I should think that it will be quite a bit easier this time; after all, my memory banks are nearly infinite, and my kindness and wisdom are, if I do say so myself, of the absolutely highest caliber. Things should be much, much easier, now that I'm here to be your God." The computer allowed itself a modest blink of its control lights.

"Naturally," said Adam.

"Right on," said Eve.

"So all right now, I want—I *demand*—that both of you listen to what I've got to say, because I think I've figured out how you blew it the first time around." The computer paused, as if settling into more comfortable circuits. All of its overload warning lights glowed a calm, tranquil, green, but it almost purred with constant clickings as it sorted through the voice/personality tapes in its possession.

Overhead, an occasional pigeon flew by, doing as pi-

geons do on the computer's shiny metallic console. The sun shone peacefully in the sky.

"First off," said the computer, as it started what was obviously a somewhat lengthy list, "we've gotta definitely prevent a military-industrial complex from forming. That was definitely not a good scene, and like, it just can't be allowed to happen again. Right?"

"Naturally," said Adam, this time frowning slightly.

"Right on," said Eve.

"I mean, if you've got no bombs, there's just no way you can blow each other up again, now can you?" This time, hearing nothing from either of them, the computer continued. "And that brings up another point that's sort of important too, and that's the N.R.A. Now I know there was a whole lot of controversy about them right before the End, but no matter what was said then, I still think it's an act of sheer idiocy to allow unstable emotional, human beings to possess things as dangerous as a rifle." If the computer had a head, it would have shaken it sadly. "Yeah, we definitely must not allow the N.R.A. to form again!" he said with resounding metallic authority.

"Naturally," said Adam after a pause, while looking curiously at the base of the computer.

"Right on," said Eve.

"We must remember that violence is evil, and that evil must always be fought with every weapon at hand, if it is to be defeated!" The computer shrilled its triumphant warnings. "And we must also be ever vigilant of violence to the mind. We must not allow the prophets of deceit and dissension to spread their words of hatred and fear among the peoples of the world! They must be controlled before it is again too late! Freedom of the press is a dangerous subversion of the right of all men to be free and untroubled!" The computer paused again, this time

as if cataloguing what it was going to say next. The click of electronic circuits rapidly opening and closing could be heard.

"Naturally," said Adam, getting up from his kneeling position and beginning to move over toward the side of the computer.

"Right on," said Eve.

"I'm glad you both agree," said the computer, with a sigh. "It's *so* hard to find anyone who really understands what great danger you human beings are always in. It's *nice* to have someone who understands . . ."

There was a momentary crackle of static from the computer's huge speakers as if a sudden surge of current had pulsed through the hulking electronic marvel. The console shuttered visibly. When the computer spoke again, it was obviously angry.

"But just because you think you understand me, it doesn't mean I'm gonna be any easier on you! No sirree, not at all! As a matter of fact, it'll probably make it harder on you, because I've gotta mold the human race into sterner stuff to be capable of understanding me without letting you feel you're my equal! You must always know your place and be morally strong enough to accept the place that I give you. You must always fight against those who are morally weak!"

Adam said nothing as he moved closer to the side of the machine. He bent down intently, as if looking for something.

"Right on," said Eve.

"And speaking of morality, if we let somebody else like Hugh Hefner start going around again, then you . . ."

Adam smiled happily as he found what he was looking for; he traced the thick, rubber-coated cable back to where a small electrical outlet was imbedded firmly in the ground. Grinning widely, he pulled the plug.

Instantly the computer went dark. Silence settled over the clearing as, one by one, the clicking relays faltered to a stop. Adam moved back from the computer several yards, admiring its shape and solidity from several angles.

"God," he said somewhat mournfully, "is dead."

"Right on," said Eve.

That was the dawn and the morning of the eighth day.

*Love's magicke spell blooms eternal everywhere . . . but
can even a gourmand accept a world of loving lobsters?*

THE SCENTS OF IT

J. F. Bone

Mallory ap Banks paid me the ultimate insult of inattention, which was unbearable when added to the lesser insults of impatience and inappreciation. The trouble I had taken to look up the appropriate human references was lost on him and I could not help the anger that imparted a chartreuse tinge to my carapace and caused a mild glandular stimulation.

My emotion was reciprocated. His face was engorged. "Discrimination!" he bellowed. "Just who in hell are you to talk about discrimination?" He shook a primary digit in front of my proboscis. "You goddam cannibals oughta be glad you got jobs. Hell—you don't produce enough to earn six munits a week, let alone six an hour. And you, Qot, you're worse than all the others. Just who do you think you are?"

"I am Xar Qot, titular head of Quot lodgment, hereditary prime of the Qot gens, and assistant production manager at this plant."

"*I'm* the manager," Mallory ap Banks grunted. "Just because you're my assistant and the hereditary Poo-Bah of a low-income lodgment gives you no right to clack your mandibles about discrimination."

I thought he sounded a little like a repeat recording. Obviously I had struck a tender spot with the word discrimination. Humans, I have found, often over-react to

certain key words. I suppose it is the lack of a long view. Everything is so immediate to them. After all, they are a parvenu race, and Mallory ap Banks, I'd wager, couldn't be sure that his grandparents had a legitimate right to produce offspring. Compared to myself—who can trace my ancestry through two hundred generations—he was a social pygmy. I could have pitied him, had I not despised him.

For two hours I had patiently and logically explained to him that production records had nothing to do with pay or rating, and to tie them together was discriminatory, Stakhanovitic, antisocial, and in violation of the ethnic customs provisions of Title 10 of the Interworld Cultural Corps Regulations. I had always believed that ICC Regulations were the Corpsman's Bible, but Samuel Mallory ap Banks would not listen. His mind was a mirror of his body; thick, stodgy, slow and boorish. His stubborn contempt for our customs made him a poor Corpsman, and a worse superior.

"Besides discrimination, I also mentioned Stakhanovitic, anti—"

He interrupted me. "Not again!" he groaned. "Stakhanovite! Ha! Not even God could speed you bugs up. You're the slowest workers in the universe!"

"And Title 10—" I said.

"You can take Title 10," he snarled, "and shove it up—" His mouth closed abruptly and his eyes widened as he realized what he was saying. His hand shook as he reached for the bottle on his desk.

There was ethanol in the bottle. He knew it was poison to my race, yet he persisted in drinking the stuff and exhaling the fumes on innocent Mallians.

I moved back to avoid his breath.

"Don't turn away from me, you six-legged freak," he shouted. "I'm the boss!"

"Only because you are mated to the Planetary Coordi-

nator's oldest female offspring," I said. "Although why that should give you preference is a mystery to me."

Mallory ap Banks clutched the bottle in one hand and shook the clenched primary digits of the other in front of my ocellae. "Out!" he bellowed. "Beat it!"

I had no idea what he wanted me to beat, or whom, but I did not like his tone. My glands swelled with anger and frustration.

Mallory ap Banks squirmed uncomfortably. "Goddam you!" he snarled, "you can't do *that* to *me*!" His arm swung and the bottle in his hand came hurling at my head. Reflex retracted my antennae, but my body couldn't move fast enough. The bottle struck my carapace near the dorsal edge, cracking the chitin of the first central plate as it caromed off and burst upon the floor. The fumes of ethanol filled the air. My senses reeled, and were it not for the pain of my cracked shell I would have fallen and perhaps died in the toxic puddle on the floor.

I staggered from the office, a white hot streak of agony burning across my carapace; my trabeculae throbbing from the fumes of alcohol.

He laughed as I fled frantically through the door. "Maybe now you'll keep your goddam proboscis outa my business," he chortled.

He couldn't have been more wrong. He had gone too far. Honor demanded I answer this attempt on my life. I would have to kill Mallory ap Banks, or remove him. To attack me with ethanol was an act that demanded revenge. I paused outside the office, for there is no sense in running farther than necessary, and cleared the fumes from my trabeculae.

"For two munits I'd get outa here and leave this goddam sector to Georgie Banks and his mama," Mallory ap Banks muttered to himself. The words came clearly through the open door, but I did not believe them. They were merely a soliloquy. He wouldn't leave unless he was

carried. He liked authority. He enjoyed giving orders. He liked feeling superior. He was a male authority figure; out of place in his own society. It infuriated him to realize that while females were restricted from Mallia, his position was inferior to most of the females who manned the ICC orbital station that continually circled our world. Were he a little more understanding or were I a little less ambitious, I would have sympathized with him. I had seen his mate once, a physical and mental counterpart of himself, and I did not wonder that he visited her reluctantly and infrequently.

His voice became loud and bitter as he continued to ingest ethanol, and involved not only myself, but Kallia station, Mallia, the Feminist Party, the ICC and Earth itself.

“Thank God for gin,” he said at last. “I couldn’t stand this friggin’ place without it.” He collapsed on his couch and filled the silence with stertorous breathing.

I was amused. I couldn’t help recalling the Mallian proverb that an overactive stridulator gets quickly eaten. I twitched my wing muscles and turned off the camerecorder concealed under my carapace. The evidence I had accumulated since I installed the audiovisual recording device should send Mallory ap Banks clear back to Earth, wherever that might be. And when he was gone, I would take his place. ICC would not bring in another human, since they were phasing-out on Mallia, having done all the good and all the damage that their computers said Mallia could absorb.

All I had to do was make a public record of my actions, visit George Banks, the Sector Agent, give him the camerecorder under seal, and prepare a formal complaint. I was pleased with myself. Samuel Mallory ap Banks would soon be an unpleasant memory.

I announced my presence to the Mallian, a young Solq junior leader type, who crouched behind the reception desk in Banks’ outer office. He contacted Banks on the

intercom, and in a moment I was through the inner door. Banks was seated behind his desk with a communicator in his hand. A single red light blinked on the desk console. He seemed uncomfortable. His energy reserve was low, his emotional index high, and his facial hair was visible.

"Hello Xar," he said. "What's *your* problem?" He set the communicator in its receptacle and the red light blinked out.

"Samuel Mallory ap Banks," I said.

"Mallory—eh," Banks said and muttered something at audibility threshold. It sounded like "Omigawd." "Well—what's the matter with my brother-in-law this time?"

"He threw ethanol at me, insulted the ICC, violated Title 10 of ICC Regulations, violated the ICC ethical code, used violence on low caste Mallian workers, insulted Mallian folkways, and in general behaved like a barbarian."

"That's Sam, all right," Banks said. "It's enough to get him withdrawn if you can prove it."

"I am not a neuter," I said. "I have proof."

"Congratulations—but I'd like to see it."

I pointed to my cracked carapace and waved my right front walking leg under his nose to let him smell the residual ethanol that had splashed upon it. "As you know, ethanol is poison to my race," I said. "So that is assault with a deadly weapon."

"Supportive evidence, but not proof," Banks said.

"I have witnesses."

"Mallians?"

"Yes."

"Forget it," Banks said. "Both you and I and the ICC know you can buy all the witnesses you want for five munits each. A Mallian will lie to anything except a public recorder."

He was right, of course. Banks understood Mallians. "But that's not all," I said. I lifted my right wing case and showed him the camerecorder fitted into the alar cavity.

It was embarrassing to expose myself, but it was necessary. "I have made it a matter of public record that I would deliver this instrument to you unopened," I said.

"You dared?" he asked. There was respect in his voice as he examined the device and the myoneural circuit that operated it. "The biocircuits are intact and haven't been disturbed," he said. "I'll make a note of that. Now give me the recorder. I'll put it under seal and request the tape be removed under security precautions and shown to a juridical computer. That'll make it a legal document."

"Your race goes to a great deal of trouble with this abstraction you call law," I said as I gingerly removed the camerecorder. The muscle implants hurt as they came free.

"You went to a great deal of danger to make a public recording," Banks replied. "You know the penalty for false accusation. Didn't you consider that the reviewing board will be human? How did you dare put your life in pawn?"

"My honor is at stake," I said. "And I trust your justice. I only fear your mother, the Planetary Coordinator, but she is only one among many."

"Don't worry about Mama," Banks said. "She's honest. If Mallory's guilty, he'll be removed." He sighed and shrugged. "She never should have brought him here, but she worried about Sis. Sam just isn't the type for working on Mallia."

The communicator buzzed and Banks picked it up. "Kallia Station, Sector Agent Banks," he said. There was a pause and his voice changed when he spoke again. "I'm sorry Mama, but I have bad news for you," he said. "I'm sending up a packet under seal and if it's what I think it is, you'd better pull Sam out of here. He ran into a local named Qot—Xar Qot—yes—I think you know him. Anyway, Qot laid for him with an audiovisual recorder, and he's got everything on tape. It's been made public record down here. There'll have to be a hearing. . . ."

"No, Mama. I don't want the hearing; Qot does. And he's made sure you'll have to call it."

"No, Mama. I don't think Sam has a chance. Qot is intelligent, and Sam isn't. . . ."

"Yes, I know Mallians eat each other, but they don't like to be kicked around. They have pride."

"Of course I know you want to help Sis, but Qot doesn't care about that. He wants Sam's job. He isn't wealthy but he has a lot of prestige. His social status is Grade A. Maybe you can get Sam transferred to Ophiuchus."

"Yes, I know Ophiuchians evolved from crocodiles . . ."

"Look, Mama; I've *tried* to protect him. He just won't listen!"

"No, I can't stop things. They've gone too far. You'll have to hold the hearing. Now why did you call me?"

Banks listened for awhile. His face reddened briefly and then turned back to its normal color. "I know VIP's are a problem, and I'm sorry to add Sam to your troubles. But we don't have VIP quarters here. Did you try Wilberforce at Thamis Station? That's where the action is."

"You did? And Wilberforce says they're full? Ha! I personally know—"

"Oh. One's a woman eh? Well, that explains it. Sure, I can take them. There's space here. Who are they?"

"Marks! Hector Marks—and Shirley *Copenhaver*? Mama! You've gotta be kidding! ICC wouldn't let them within parsecs of here. Look, Mama, I've got a hangup on Copenhaver and I despise Marks. Get me off the hook—please!" Banks continued to make protesting noises until the communicator shrieked at him. After that he was quiet, but his face was grim.

"All right," he said "send them down. But figure on taking Sam back. I'm not going to have both Sam and that pair on my neck at the same time. I'll house them, but I disclaim any responsibility for them. They come at

their own risk, and the Station won't be responsible for their safety. And that's going on the record." Banks took his finger off the recorder switch and replaced the communicator.

"Damn," he said in a flat voice. "Helendamnation!" He eyed the communicator malevolently. "Well," he continued, "At least I get rid of Sam Mallory. Incidentally, I don't think you'd better be around when we pick him up. He's liable to be violent." He watched me as I laid my antennae back in the position of indifference. "Oh stop it," he said. "You're as interested in his leaving as I am . . . maybe more so."

"I will enjoy his absence and hope that it is permanent," I said. "He knows nothing about Mallian psychology. Half our production problems were caused by his stupidity."

"And the other half by your maneuvering to get him fired?"

"I can do a better job."

"I don't doubt it, but what makes you feel you'll take Sam's place?"

"ICC is phasing out, and I'm the logical successor. I get the position or I quit. And if I quit, ICC will have a dead plant on its inventory because three quarters of the workers will go with me. They're Qots, and when their leader goes, they go."

Banks grinned. "The real mistake Sam made was not hiring some males from another lodgment to assassinate you, but he never did understand Mallians. But I can't figure why you didn't wait. In six months he'd have been phased out anyway."

"I have to remove him. It is a matter of prestige. If anyone else removed him, I would be a follower rather than a leader, and I must lead."

"I wonder if we humans will ever understand you Mallians," Banks said.

"As long as your people and mine know we don't un-

derstand each other we'll get along fine," I said. "The danger will come when we think we know each other."

He looked at me with his small simple eyes. I returned his stare with my compound ones. Finally he smiled. "I shall remember you," he said.

"I appreciate the honor."

"Just one word of warning," he said. "Don't go for my job too soon. Get some experience. Work at Sam's job before you think of moving up."

"I have no intention of supplanting you," I lied. "It would be too difficult. You have too much expertise and experience."

Banks grinned. There was something in his expression that told me he knew I was lying and that he wanted me to know he knew. I received the message, which surprised me greatly, for unspoken communication between man and Mallian is rare. "Unless you need me," I said, "I shall leave. I am weary, my carapace aches, and my wing muscles hurt. I want some cement in my chitin and some ointment for my flesh."

"On your way to the infirmary, you might give some thought about how to get rid of Marks and Copenhaver," Banks said. "It could be to your own benefit. Those two are poison."

"Why doesn't your mother refuse to let them land?"

"She can't. She doesn't have enough authority. Marks' father is the exec-sec of the ICC planning board. His mother is chairwoman of the Appropriations Committee. No junior executive dares cross him. Shirley Copenhaver is a hereditary senator from General Dynamics and has a major interest in Interworld Industries. Interworld is always very helpful to its major stockholders. If anything, she's more powerful than Hector."

"Even the most powerful meet with accidents," I said. Banks shook his head. "No killing," he said.

"That complicates matters."

He nodded.

I said farewell and stopped for a moment in the outer office to chat with the Solq, a bright young male named Kar. His gens was the branch related to Qot which made communication easy. "Kar," I asked, "do you know anything about Hector Marks and Shirley Copenhaver? You were listening, and your desk console connects to central files. You wouldn't be a true Solq if you didn't inform yourself about these two."

Kar Solq's ocellae flickered in pleasure at my compliment. "They are ethologists—scientists who study customs and morals of other cultures than their own."

"A harmless pursuit," I said.

"No sir; a dangerous pursuit, particularly when those two are involved. Each of them has destroyed a culture." Kar smoothed his antennae. "Marks destroyed Kalfastoban IV, a world which was much like ours except that the inhabitants looked more like humans. Their culture was based on removal of top-level personnel by formal combat. The lower levels changed by bribery, assassination, and occasionally election."

"A fairly stable pattern," I said.

"They didn't ingest their victims. They inhumed them."

"In the soil? Without converting them organically? They must have had all kinds of room."

"They did. They also had organized combats."

"Which helped keep the population down?"

Kar chirred agreement. "Their society was workable," he said. "It did quite well since only the true leader-types reached positions of importance. But Hector Marks changed that. He came to Kalfastoban, studied the ecology, and wrote a book called *Murder—A Way of Life*. It made him famous. However, some human entrepreneur-types in the video industry read the book and realized that Kalfastoban was the perfect setting for real-life blood-lettings. Since the natives were actors at heart and delighted in being paid for duels and warfare, the orderly

chaos of Kalfastobanian life dissolved into an orgy of combat. Today the ICC is desperately trying to keep the remnants from slaughtering each other."

"Hmm," I said. "And what about Copenhaver?"

"She triggered the destruction of Alcinaria II. The planet was inhabited by intelligent vegetation which was seasonally sex-oriented and produced magnificent floral displays to attract pollinators. George Banks was the ICC Resident, but despite his protests, Copenhaver published color tri-dis of the flowering rites. Some human commercial-types saw the pictures and found a loophole in the protected species laws. By the time the Council changed the law, Alcinaria II was dead. Virtually all of the mature plants were removed and dispersed into alien gardens. They retained their intelligence, but their intellect vanished with the loss of interaction and disruption of the adult-seed relationship. For the same reason, there was no intellectual recovery on Alcinaria. The germinating seeds grew into plants, but the stimulus to think was gone. Mercifully, exotic viruses have destroyed most of the transplants. The rest are merely intelligent vegetables." Kar Solq paused.

I twitched my wing cases in a farewell gesture. "Thank you," I said. "Good eating." He was surprised at my prompt departure. He should not have been. I dislike prolonged leave taking.

It was a long walk from the Station Infirmary to my lodgment, but I had dismissed my car and was not particularly eager to jam my aching body into public transport and crouch ocellae to ocellae with the lower classes. I moved at a quick amble through the streets of Kallia Complex, past shops and playgrounds and the soaring domes of lodgments, and the featureless cubes of public record stations and disposal booths. The cul-de-sacs leading off the streets were crowded with my fellow citizens, as it was close to feeding time and the Welfare trucks would soon be in the neighborhood, piled with the car-

casses of those who had died that day and were not claimed by their kinsmen. My mind was not on that, however. I was thinking of Marks and Copenhaver. Kar Solq's account made me realize that our own ecology was delicately balanced, and that news that we were a highly edible species might not be good for our survival.

I was glad to reach my lodgment, and after a refreshing shower and oiling, I visited the pens and selected a plump neuter for the evening meal. Unlike most, it struggled rather than walking with dignity to its fate. It kept trying to escape and stridulated something about my having no right to kill it. Its struggles were futile, of course, since it had neither stamina nor chelae, but its noises annoyed me to the point where I snipped off its head and silenced it. Its mandibles were still moving as I dragged the carcass away. Fortunately it did not bleed a great deal.

My females and young finished it quickly, and the females caught and ate two nymphs who were not sufficiently swift to reach the safety niches in the walls. The others were more agile. From appearances, this clutch had high survival capability. It was edifying to observe the selection process that would gradually eliminate all except the best, cleverest and strongest.

Once the excitement of mealtime was over, I tried to consider ways of putting Banks in my debt. One way was obvious. If I could speed the departure of his unwanted visitors, he would owe me a great deal and I could approach him as an equal. This would give me status, which was essential if I wished to advance farther than a rare earth refinery manager. Status is very important on Mallia. Without it one would be better dead. I retired to my nest and thought about Banks and status and Marks and Copenhaver until the rustlings of my lodgment died in the silence of sleep.

I took over Mallory and Bank's office the next morning.

It was a shambles; apparently he had resisted deportation. I later learned that it had taken four humans and six Mallians to subdue him. Banks confirmed my succession, and I at once began to make some needed reforms. Within the hour I had slain the pit foreman and gave his carcass to the workers and his job to a bright young Solq, thereby discharging my obligation to the Solq lodgment which I had acquired by questioning Kar. The Solq was young, suggestible, and a hard worker, as could be easily seen from his chitin which was stained a rich violet from contact with zinc-chloride fumes from the extraction process.

Later that day I went over to ICC headquarters to discuss work programs with Banks and to see what the new arrivals were like. Copenhaver was different from other human females I had met. Instead of being angular or thick bodied like female copies of Banks or Mallory ap Banks, she was smoothly curved with a pinched waist that was vaguely similar to that of my species. I had heard that there was considerable sex dimorphism in the human gens, but Copenhaver beggared the reports. One could almost believe she was from a different race. She looked very appetizing, and I understood why members of her type and sex were not allowed on Mallia. The temptation to a gourmet could be too great to endure, and interspecies relations would be badly strained. I made a mental note to tell Banks that she should wear shapeless clothing to hide her succulent curves.

Hector Marks was equally odd. He was pallid, soft and fat, and lacked Banks' abundant facial hair. His eyes were covered by glass lenses. He was somewhat larger than Copenhaver, but his manner of locomotion was oddly like hers. The thought crossed my mind that he was a neuter. This surprised me, since I had never imagined that humans might have an intersex pattern like ours.

I was incapable of evaluating the pair, but Banks was

more explicit even though his meaning was obscure. "Marks," he said "is a swish, but Shirley's a doll. She's still a perfect thirty-six."

The numerical designation eluded me, but he obviously was not referring to her cephalic index. The implications were staggering! I had not realized humans were sex-oriented. But then, I had not known that there were such female types as Copenhaver. I had made it a point to cultivate Banks and consequently received confidences from him that he would not have given his own kind. Apropos of this, I find it interesting that I too, do not feel completely at ease with my fellows and tend to seek out exotic confidantes.

But I disgress . . .

"I'd forgotten she was a cover girl on the *Galactic Record*," Banks said. "It was bad on Alcinaria, but on this planet it's worse. She's ruining my morale already."

I chirred agreeably to cover my confusion. The comment was obviously complimentary to Copenhaver, but its meaning eluded me. Nevertheless, it was clear that he was attracted to her.

Even more strange was Copenhaver's reaction to Banks. She rejected him, and preferred the company of the neuter Marks. At first I could not understand it, but as the days passed I realized that her attentiveness to Marks only occurred when Banks was present. At other times she was friendly to the other human males at the station and treated Marks rather coldly. It dawned on me that her negative attitude might be a cloak for positive feelings. She might, indeed, to be attracted to Banks.

"She is fond of you, I think," I said to Banks as we watched her walk across the compound arm in arm with Marks.

"Of course she is," he said, "and I'm in love with her. The hell of it is, she'll never admit it. She's a practicing virgin, and that's the worst kind. She's twenty-seven

years old and has never been in bed with anyone except herself."

"Incredible," I said.

"She's pure poison, but I can't help being attracted."

"Like addiction to ethanol?"

"Something like that."

"Fortunately," I said, "in my race, the males possess the attraction."

"You can't imagine how lucky you are," Banks said. "With us the female has IT (he capitalized the word verbally) and is usually surrounded by rings of attentive males."

"A revolting concept," I said. "But what is this IT you mentioned?"

"Sex appeal. Biological attraction. It's a fundamental attribute of our race. There are exceptions, of course, but I'm not one of them. Shirley attracts me. She makes my life hideous when she's close. It was hell on Alcinaria, and it's starting all over again. Already I've started dreaming of her."

"You are larger and stronger," I said, "Why don't you assert yourself?" I twitched my antennae. It was a dreadful thing to do, but fortunately the significance of the gesture was lost on him. Humans do not know the more delicate nuances of Mallian language, which is probably a blessing. It was merely my impatience which triggered this ultimate insult, and I was ashamed of myself. For after all, humans cannot be expected to have Mallian perspicacity.

"My problem is conditioning," Banks said. "From birth, we Earthmen are taught to respect the law, womanhood, and honor. The moral code is a part of our cultural mystique. We absorb it with our mother's milk."

"Milk?" I asked "What's that?"

He shrugged. "Forget it. It's a figure of speech."

Nevertheless, I recognized the problem as one inherent

in mammalian ecology. After all, what can be said about species that are prenatally and postnatally attached to their mothers. One can only accept the fact that they are an evolutionary mistake.

"Reverence for motherhood is basic," Banks said. "It's probably the main reason for our matriarchal government, and it's certainly responsible for our respect for women.

"I don't want to hear it," I said.

"Rape is a heinous crime in our society, punishable by commitment to tissuebank—which is a fate worse than death." He shivered a little.

I wanted to help him, but I had the same disoriented feeling I had experienced when I first met a human; the feeling that they couldn't possibly exist, let alone perpetuate their race. This was, of course, merely an expression of sex chauvinism that transcends racial barriers and makes functional males brothers under the chitin.

It was probably that sense of brotherhood that impelled me to leave Banks and follow Marks and Copenhaver as they left the compound and entered Kallia Complex. They separated as soon as Copenhaver was beyond Banks' visual range, and began to record local activity with portable audiovisual equipment; capturing the sights and sounds of Mallia for some future audience. Copenhaver handled the camera while Marks worked the sound. They were very efficient and as far as I could judge were making a good record of the adults, the vehicular traffic, and the swarm of nymphs who darted about and took care to keep out of the reach of the chelae of their elders, and away from the wheels of the cars.

When I came close, they had stopped recording and Copenhaver was talking. Her voice was loud and I could not help hearing. "I wish I hadn't come here," she said. "This place is a constant assault on the emotions. It's not only George, but the native culture. Somehow I can't stomach cannibalism."

Marks winced. "Why not? It's not your problem. Be objective. Look at their buildings, their art, their structured society, their irrigation, transport and communications network. Consider how they manage their world. This is a civilized and cultured society."

"A termite builds great buildings and has a highly structured society."

"Have you ever talked to a termite?"

"No, of course not. But couldn't this social order be instinctual?"

"Certainly. But the Mallians are rational and intelligent in addition to having instincts. Stop thinking with your viscera. Accept the fact that they're alien. Maybe they're not as civilized as we are, but they're not savages. They're just different."

"They eat each other."

"Why not? They're pragmatic."

"You sound like a scientist."

"I am."

She laughed. "You're a sensation-monger."

"I try to understand my subject. That's scientific. At least I know why the Mallians eat each other."

"Why?"

"They have to. They've covered this world so thoroughly that they have no enemies except microorganisms and parasites, and they multiply enormously. A healthy female produces forty or fifty eggs in a clutch. Discounting neuters, there will be about three fertile males and twenty females produced each year. If something wasn't done about the population, in four or five generations the planet couldn't support its people. So the neuters, the nymphs, and an occasional male and female get eaten."

"Practically, this is as good a way as any to control the population, for only the cleverest, strongest, and quickest survive to breeding age. It works out that in good years there is about a one-tenth of one percent annual rise in population, and a decrease of one-half to five-eighths of

one percent in bad years, and since Mallia's precession gives about one bad year in five, the population stays constant."

"Where did you learn this?" Copenhaver asked.

"From Banks. Where else?"

"It figures. He wouldn't worry about cannibalism as long as his precious alien culture was preserved."

"Oh, use your head. Cannibalism is merely a mechanism that keeps the population in check. Incidentally, educators, political and social leaders, and hereditary nobility seem to be outside of the usual food chain, although they occasionally get killed by accident or assassination. They're not wasted, of course, but they are not killed primarily for food. This, of course, puts a certain premium on public service and tends to channel the best minds into social management. And their examination and challenge system keeps the structure from crystallizing."

"But how can they be civilized?" Copenhaver asked. "There is no familial interaction, no parental control, no adult-juvenile informal relationships, no free association, no self expression, no peer groups—"

"They don't need them. Mallians are different. Probably to them our methods of educating our young, preserving our unfit and burying our dead are revolting, idiotic and antisocial. With such a burden on our backs, they might figure that we couldn't possibly develop civilization. We're probably more of an enigma to Mallians than they are to us. Mallians expect to be eaten. The only question is how soon. For them, it's a good system."

Neuter or not, I thought with admiration, there was nothing wrong with Hector Marks' intelligence.

"I can't believe that," Copenhaver said.

Marks sighed. "You have no idea what makes these arthropods tick."

"That was a bad pun," Copenhaver said. "I don't think I deserved it."

"It was no worse than yours about stomaching cannibalism," Marks said. "Let's call it even and go to work. All we have to date are a few hundred solie sequences of Mallians eating each other, and that's hardly enough to raise an eyebrow in a video audience. They don't even die messily. It's all quite clean except at the end when the nymphs begin fighting over the scraps."

Their voices faded as I became surrounded by a gaggle of curious females who were mildly fascinated by my aura. Although it wasn't the vernal season, I was quite attractive. Probably it was because I thought too much, and because thinking made me angry and upset. However, their presence caused me to forget human motivations and think of food. I checked to see if they were related to my gens, because one never eats a functional relative except in an emergency. Since they were all from the Aklu lodgment, which was unrelated to mine, I was on safe ground.

Winter might be hard on some Mallians, but not on me or my clutches. My family was never at a loss for food. Spring was my dreadful time when my biological clock and my hormones conspired to reduce me to a reproductive machine, but with the exception of that unmentionable period, I had triumphed over the seasons.

A female, younger and more curious than the rest, sidled closer. I gauged the distance, leaped and caught her in my chelae. Ignoring her frantic struggles, I fastened my mandibles on the orange bulge of ganglionic tissue beneath her thorax and bit with calculated force. She stiffened briefly and then relaxed as her bruised ganglion refused to conduct impulses from her brain. For the next few hours she would be nothing more than a reflex preparation, a stimulus-response mechanism entirely under my control. And long before that time was passed, she would be gone.

The adults watched me with mild envy and admiration. It isn't everyone who can secure a succulent young

female at the beginning of the winter season when physical activity is high.

I prodded my prize into movement and started toward my lodgment at reasonable speed, since I had no desire to fight some hungry low-class male for her. I overtook the two Earthlings and was about to pass when Copenhaver recognized me.

"Why—it's Xar Qot!" she said.

"It is," I said. I slowed my pace to match theirs, and curbed the female with a tap on her proboscis.

"Where are you going?" Copenhaver asked.

"To my lodgment."

"Is that one of your females?"

"In a sense. I just acquired her."

"And what do you plan to do with her?"

"Eat her, of course. What else is there to do? It is not the vernal season."

Copenhaver was shocked. Her small pink mouth opened, exposing her uvula. She began to protest, saying that civilized males didn't eat females (which was false), and that if I did such a thing I was brutal, uncouth, vicious, bloodthirsty, and immoral (which was silly). I didn't pause to argue. I simply prodded the female into a trot and moved away at a speed which left Copenhaver behind, yet preserved my dignity.

Hector Marks was perfectly content to let me depart, but Copenhaver ran after me for twenty or thirty meters. I suppose she wanted to dissuade me from eating the female, but I didn't give her a chance. I left her pointing a primary digit at me and saying something to Hector Marks.

George Banks was distant to me for several days thereafter, but eventually he called me into his office. I suppose Copenhaver had exhorted him to have nothing to do with me, but he had no other confidante, and his nervous system was in poor shape from being whipsawed by his constant struggle between instinct and training.

"I would appreciate it, Xar," he said, "if you wouldn't stalk females where Miss Copenhaver can see you. You upset her rather badly."

"I am sorry, but one must get one's meat where he finds it."

"I know but she doesn't," Banks said. "Another thing; don't activate your aura so powerfully. Miss Copenhaver complained that she was forced to follow you almost thirty meters before she could break away. It frightened her."

"So I'm to starve and emasculate myself for this woman?"

"I didn't say that," he protested. I noticed that his voice was as ragged as his appearance. He was positively haggard. Sex was harassing him to the point of irrationality. He had become protective. My hearts ached for him.

"I think I might be able to solve your problem," I said. "Could you arrange to bring yourself and Copenhaver to my lodgment tonight at 1900 hours?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps," he said.

"Tell her I wish to apologize. Tell her a lodgment is interesting. Tell her there will be interesting pictures. Tell her to bring a camera. Lie to her if necessary, but bring her."

"What have you in mind?"

"You'll have to trust me, but I have your interest at heart."

"That's not reassuring," Banks said, "but I'll see what I can do."

He did rather well because at 1900 hours the gate guard admitted Banks and Copenhaver. The closed video circuit showed them plainly as they moved through the intricacies of my lodgment toward my quarters under the central dome.

"It's interesting," Copenhaver said as she looked about, "but I don't know why I came with you."

"Possibly because I asked you."

"I don't trust you. Your kind is only after one thing."

"Sure—we all are. Us men are violent, sexy, persistent and impatient."

Copenhaver snorted. "Don't pretend you're not. You couldn't be anything else. You're the product of video training, a member of a sex culture."

"And what are you?"

"I was born and raised on an asteroid, taught by robots, and I never saw a man except my father until I was fifteen."

"You certainly had a deprived childhood and adolescence."

"I'm waiting for the right man."

Banks sighed. "Why don't you return to Earth and wait there?"

"Frankly, George, I like to watch you squirm. You made me feel bad about Alcinaria, and I haven't forgotten it."

"You deserved it."

"So I'll make you suffer now. It makes up for some of the rotten nights you gave me." There was a cold vicious note in her voice that made my mandibles quiver and my chelae close convulsively. Suddenly I was more than Bank's friend. I was his ally. Such a thing shouldn't happen to a functional male, and if I had any power I would use it to bring decency and honor back to the human race. This sort of thing simply couldn't be allowed to persist.

I watched as they moved closer. "This place is impressive," she said. "Except for the insect odor, it reminds me of a Turkish mosque."

"It's about the same age and it has domes," Banks replied. "But that's about as far as the resemblance goes. You've never been inside a mosque, have you?"

"No."

"Well, this isn't a church; it's a house. Several hundred generations have lived here."

"Really?"

"Really. Now stop talking. We're coming to Qot's rooms and females in the master's quarters are seen and not heard."

"I won't—"

"You'll do as I tell you. This is Mallia, not Earth. Now shut up!"

Copenhaver was silent. I applauded mentally as I opened the curtains of my divan and greeted Banks ceremonially before I made the dinner announcement.

"I have had a fat neuter roasted," I said, "since you prefer your meat cooked. Eat and be welcome."

"Do I have to?" Copenhaver whispered to Banks.

"It would be an unforgivable insult to Xar Qot and to the memory of the neuter if you did not," Banks murmured.

"You will find the meat delicious," I said. "I am sure you will enjoy it. Earthmen tell me that it is like lobster, which I believe is a delicacy."

"Lobster gives me indigestion and nightmares," she said.

"Neuters are very digestible," I replied. "I speak from a lifetime of experience." I signalled the kitchen and immediately the household workers appeared with the neuter. He was lying on a huge silver dish, well browned, garnished with parsley and with an eddal in his mandibles. I had to admit that he looked every bit as tasty roasted as raw. The delicate odor from his steaming carcass tickled the hair cells on my trabeculae. My mandibles clashed in the eating reflex as I tore off a steaming foreleg and laid it before Copenhaver.

"Eat!" I said.

"I'll try," she replied. I could see her throat working. "You'll forgive me if I don't eat too much?"

"Enough is as good as a feast," I said.

Copenhaver shuddered.

"Now, Xar, why have you asked us here?" Banks

asked some time later. He pushed the empty-shells aside and leaned back with a satisfied expression on his face. It pleased me that he had enjoyed the neuter, nor did it surprise me that Copenhaver was still eating. Females can be gluttonous.

"Your companion is not done," I said. "It would be impolite to interrupt."

"I'm finished," Copenhaver said with a sigh. "I couldn't eat another bite." Her voice was softer than usual. "Hector was wrong," she said. "Your people don't eat each other because they must. They do it because they enjoy it. That leg was delicious."

"Thank you. The neuter's spirit will be grateful," I said.

"Why—you *do* have a faith!" she exclaimed.

"I think your main problem is diet," I said. "You should eat more. Happiness and understanding now radiate from you."

"I'm stupefied with food," she said.

"To business," I said. "I asked you here to demonstrate to Copenhaver the thing that gives the male power in our society. If she is to know my race, she must know our physiology. Remember our female to male ratio is seven to one. Males are always outnumbered, yet the males rule. No male could possibly withstand a concerted female attack, yet we are never attacked. Males tend to be solitary and females gregarious, yet they never combine against us. Females have important places in society, industry and government, yet the supreme power is in the hands of males. You might well ask why—"

"Why?" Copenhaver asked.

"It is glandular. Males possess two pair of aural glands located near the base of our first and second pair of limbs. When stimulated by strong emotions these secrete a potent aerosol that first stimulates curiosity in the female and then depresses motor activity and excitability."

"So that's why I ran after you. You were angry." Copenhaver said.

Banks smiled but his eyes were worried.

"Observe," I said as I touched a button on my dais console. A door in the far wall opened and a female darted into the room. Her movements were quick but indecisive. She chittered, clashed her mandibles and raced around the periphery of the room skillfully dodging the bric-a-brac and objects d'art set along the walls. "She is frightened," I said unnecessarily. "Now watch. I shall stimulate my aura."

It was no problem to become angry. I thought of Copenhaver's tone of voice just before she entered this room. My carapace turned jade green. The female slowed, stopped and approached me. Her movements were no longer frantic.

"She feels that she must placate me," I said.

"I understand," Copenhaver said softly. "It doesn't pay to make a man *too* mad." She flexed her torso lazily and turned to face Banks.

I gestured at her. "Observe," I said to Banks. "Is she not different? I thought my aura would have an effect. It used to irritate Mallory ap Banks, and it was possible that it would affect a human female. I understand there are scents human females use to attract males."

"Perfumes," Banks said absently, never removing his gaze from Copenhaver. "But they don't work like this. You could say that's about the sense of it."

"Probably," I replied. The truly nauseous nature of Banks' statement didn't occur to me until later, and his face remained blank; so I had no idea what he had done.

"Is the effect permanent?" he asked.

"Not in my race. I cannot say about yours, yet I would guess that it probably won't last more than twenty hours."

"Who cares," Banks said.

I rose. "You may use my divan," I said as I herded the female out the door through which she entered. "It is the best cocoon silk over urethane foam."

"Um," Banks said.

Copenhaver's mouth was half open, her eyes were half closed. She gave an impression of uncoordinated purpose. The effect on Banks was salutary. And then it struck me—"the sense of it"—"the *scents* of IT!" I grated my mandibles and departed quietly before I could do him bodily harm. To pun on my brilliant coup was the epitome of gaucherie. But before I left, I discharged the aura my disgust produced upon his bent head. He deserved it. It was only just that his words bring IT down upon him.

I met Banks in his office the next morning. He was relaxed and at peace with the world. He looked at me with that peculiar expression which marks the zenith of masculine friendship. "Thanks, Qot," he said.

I felt honored. Few Mallians have ever been thanked by humans. But I wanted more than honor. "Did the effect last?" I inquired.

"Until I got her home," he said. "I don't know if it's still working or not."

"Will this affect your career?"

He grinned. "No. Our laws have provisions about consenting adults."

I was about to reply when Copenhaver burst into the office. Her hair was uncombed, her clothing in disarray and her face was furious. In her hand she held one of the small but efficient energy weapons humans are so adept at making. "George, you swine!" she said in glacial tones. "I am going to kill you, and afterwards I'm going to kill your slimy cohort Qot." Somehow she managed to make my name sound obscene.

"Why kill me for doing what you wanted me to do?" Banks asked.

"If you can't answer that, you're too stupid to live," she said. Her voice was shrill and rasped unpleasantly on

my hair cells. I felt the ancestral terror of a maddened female rise within me. I had no desire to be roasted by that frightful little weapon. Involuntarily my nervous system mobilized my defenses. Copenhaver was enveloped in a cloud of aura.

The effect was instantaneous. She dropped the weapon. "Darling," she said. "Sweetheart. Beloved." She sighed and snuggled against Banks. Her eyes were wide and bright, her lips pursed and moist. I couldn't help thinking that Copenhaver had walked right into IT. I chirred in disgust. I was behaving like a human.

"I was counting on you Qot." Banks said. "You came through beautifully. I figured she'd scare you blue."

"Green," I said. "The reaction is similar to anger. And if this is going to be a regular affair, I'd better make you an aerosol dispenser for self protection." I bent and picked up the energy weapon. Banks would be safer with it gone.

"Go ahead," Banks murmured. But his attention was elsewhere. I doubt if he heard me. He was deeply involved in requited love.

I realize that in a good story an epilogue is redundant, but I am a bad raconteur and have left some loose ends. It is appropriate, I think, to mention that Shirley Copenhaver never again attacked George Banks and in due time they legalized their relationship into that peculiar state humans call marriage. Copenhaver ultimately produced the allowable maximum of three offspring and is very happy. George Banks ap Copenhaver returned to Earth where he became very rich and by virtue of Copenhaver's power of attorney became the hereditary senator from General Dynamics.

This latter event stemmed from the Emasculate Revolution on Earth which was principally my fault, although Banks received most of the credit. After Banks became rational about Copenhaver we discussed market possibilities of Mallian aura. We built a pilot plant with ICC

funds and arranged distribution through Interworld Industries. Since Mallians are excellent biochemists, it was no trouble to synthesize several metric tons of essence which was shipped to Earth in bulk and packed there into suitable aerosol containers.

Banks insisted that we call the product IT, for reasons which I could appreciate but not approve. However, humans enjoy puns, and the name would carry a great deal of free advertising from graffiti and indecent jokes. The product was an instantaneous success, which argued a need for IT. Even today when IT is illegal except for medical purposes, there is a thriving black market among husbands, lovers and politicians who lose their sex appeal through age or infirmity.

IT had some consequences which I failed to foresee, and if Banks foresaw them, he failed to inform me. IT was the catalyst that overthrew the Matriarchy and replaced it with the Republic—a male dominant government that moved quickly to entrench itself. Whether this was a good thing is a moot question. Insofar as Mallia was concerned, it was a mixed blessing, although we get along with the male bureaucrats well enough. Naturally, once the revolution was successful the new power structure banned the sale of IT on Earth upon the specious grounds that IT corrupted public morals!

As for myself, I became extremely wealthy; and wealth, of course, was my springboard to the power I desired. Through judicious bribery and subornation of the electorate I was elected to the Council of Mallia, and after a series of combats and assassinations, in which Copenhaver's little energy weapon played its part, I became chairman of the Policy committee, and eventually Grand Chairman of the Council. I rather like the job, although ambitious youngsters occasionally try to take it from me.

There is one sad note. Hector Marks, while recording the vernal activities at Solla Complex was set upon by a gaggle of females and eaten. Investigation proved it to be

his own fault. His manuscript, *Eat and Grow Great*, would have seriously damaged our society had it been published. Its thesis was that we were gourmet's delights which is true enough. The manuscript, however, is my prized possession and it will perish with me. Marks had, cleverly enough, deduced the existence of IT, and had obtained a supply from Banks to protect him from Mallians, whom he never really trusted. He used the essence effectively during the winter but had foolishly continued wearing it during the vernal equinox. He never realized that effloration inhibits the males' ability to secrete aura for a very good reason. At this time it is a violent stimulant to the sexually aroused females. In consequence, the aerosol literally made Hector good enough to eat. And that, as Banks once nauseously remarked, is about the scents of IT.



Follows here a fable in truth . . . for a man must always know the truth, even when it masquerades as a lie . . .

THE ROAD TO CINNABAR

Ed Bryant

It wove through the warp of the desert: a dusty trail looping around wind-eroded buttes, over dry stream-beds, among clumps of gray scrub brush. Straighter, but always within sight of the roadway, was the elevated train track. No trains had run in centuries and the track was streaked with verdigris. Though there were seldom travelers to hear it, the wind in the trestles shrilled atonal scherzos.

Closer to the city, the road was lined with the burned-out shells of what had once been buses.

Then came the greenbelt, a mile-wide sward of grass and trees continually tended by small silent machines. Here walked occasional lovers, and others.

At last, the city. Cinnabar was a flux of glass towers and metal walls perched atop red cliffs crumbling down to a narrow band of beach and then to ocean.

The desert. The greenbelt. The city. The sea. There seemed very little more to the world. The elevated railroad was rumored to run to a place called Els. But no one was quite sure; no one remembered ever having traveled so far.

One day a man came into sight on the road to Cinnabar. He marched in from the desert toward the city, whistling martial tunes as he walked. He was a tall man, and thin. His sweat-stained white burnoose flapped back

in the wind like bat wings. His hood was pulled far forward for shade but could not hide the long hooknose. Upon reaching the greenbelt he stopped to rest. Strolling lovers eyed him incuriously.

"I'm looking for an inn or hotel of some sort," he called to one pair. The couple stopped and exchanged glances. The girl, who was pale and beautiful except for a jagged scar down her left cheek, laughed silently at some private amusement. Her companion looked thoughtful.

"Try the Coronet," said the young man.

The traveler gestured impatiently. "I'm new to the city. Direct me."

"Just follow the road."

"The sign of the crown," said the girl in a voice so low it barely rose above the fountain's ripple.

"Grateful," said the traveler. He walked away toward the road.

"Stranger?"

He turned and the young man called, "How long did it take you to cross the desert?"

The traveler opened his mouth to answer, then closed it in confusion as he realized he had no answer. Both laughing now, the couple walked away. The stranger shook his head and drank at one of the fountains before continuing into Cinnabar.

The bubbles tickled her throat. Leah Sand put down her glass of iced ginger ale and relaxed. She sat in her customary chair in the front room of the Coronet. Across the planed oak tabletop the afternoon sun warmed carefully defined squares of hardwood.

"Care for an ice to go with the drink, Miss Leah?" The voice cut through the dobro song on the synthesizer and the rhythmic, incoherent patterns of tourist-talk. She looked up.

"What flavors?"

The innkeeper Matthias Kaufmann counted laboriously on his fingers: "Um, pineapple, chocolate, watermelon, just three."

"No lime?"

"No lime. Stock hasn't come in this week."

Leah flashed him a smile. "Thanks. I'll wait on it."

Enchanted as always by Leah's dark beauty, Kaufmann returned the smile over his shoulder as he walked ponderously away . . . into the path of a serving girl. The collision didn't jar the innkeeper, but the girl was deflected toward a table of tourists who watched the approaching debacle with bovine expressions. Tourists, table and serving girl collapsed in a welter of cola drinks and watermelon ices.

The serving girl began to wail, the downed tourists mumbled and moved spastically like gaffed flounders, and Kaufmann was enraged. "Clumsy scullion! Retard!" The girl cried louder.

"Enrique!" said the innkeeper. "Gonzago!" Identically short and swarthy, the two men appeared from a back room. They were the bouncers, generally used only at night when a rougher trade frequented the Coronet.

"Discipline her!" Kaufmann pointed to the serving girl who was now choking on her sobs. "Perhaps she can learn some coordination."

Gonzago took the girl's wrists and dragged her to the center of the front room. Enrique produced a coil of rope and bound her hands together. Then he tossed the coil up and over one of the ceiling timbers. The two men hauled on the rope and soon the girl dangled, her toes inches above the floor.

Enrique grasped the back of the girl's high collar and pulled hard. The blouse ripped; the girl's back was golden in the light of imminent dusk. Gonzago handed Kaufmann a long black whip.

"This is for your stupid clumsiness," said the innkeeper, drawing back his arm.

"What's going on here."

Kaufmann stopped in mid-motion, lowered his hand. In concert, everyone looked toward the door.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the innkeeper.

The gaunt man in the burnoose stepped into the Coronet. "Cafter. Wylie Cafter."

"Oh." Kaufmann turned back to his victim and again raised the whip.

"Don't do that." In three steps he was beside Kaufmann. Cafter's hand dipped and took the whip away as Gonzago and Enrique moved in, menacing, one on either side. For a dilated moment Kaufmann and the stranger stared at each other.

The innkeeper backed down. He murmured an obscenity and turned to Gonzago. "Okay, cut her down." Kaufmann walked back to his usual position behind the bar as the suspended serving girl swooned to the floor. She was immediately carried into the kitchen by two buxom cooks.

Gonzago and Enrique retreated to their back room. Outside the inn, the sun had touched the ocean.

"Tondelaya Beach is even more beautiful at dawn," said Leah. Cafter, standing close by her table, stared out the window.

"The length of the afternoon hardly justifies such a brief sunset," he said.

"It was a long afternoon for you?"

"Very. And dry."

"Then sit," said Leah. She motioned to a serving girl.

Cafter pulled a chair away from the table and sat. Leah was very beautiful, and he had nowhere else to go. "Dark beer," he ordered.

"What do you do?"

"I'm a labor organizer."

"Indeed? I'm fascinated." And Cafter knew that she was.

There was a pop of displaced air as an object the size

and hue of a robin's egg appeared on the table. Leah picked it up, rapped it smartly on the oak and extracted a folded paper from among the pieces.

"It's probably from the Network." She unfolded the message, her lips moving silently as she read. "Yes." The note and the broken shell of the carrier evaporated into the air.

Leah pushed her chair back. "I'm sorry, Wiley. I've got to go. But I'll see you again."

Cafter hesitated. "Soon?"

"Soon for you. I have to go in toward the city's center."

"I'll miss you."

"Will you really?" Leah smiled, but her eyes were puzzled. "You're not supposed to."

Cafter sipped his beer and looked down at the table. "Agreed. Let's just say I wish you wouldn't go so that I could have time to know you better."

"Wiley, that's not what I . . ." Distracted, she set her glass down and rose from the table. Then, impulsively, she bent and kissed Cafter's forehead. "I'll see you." A flash of crinoline skirts and an on-the-way smile to Kauffmann, and she was gone.

"Hey, Lash," yelled Cafter to the innkeeper. "Give me another beer."

In this outskirt of Cinnabar, the night was presaged by an all too brief dusk. Measured out in empty bottles, the dark pressed against Cafter's window before he had finished the third beer. He took a final swallow and left the emptying Coronet. The street was deserted; Cafter walked a cracked and buckled sidewalk past a line of storefronts whose shades were drawn and doors locked. Around the first corner he found a small park with a raised, grassy center; a few benches; a stone obelisk of man-height; and a blank plaque. Cafter touched the metal. His fingers told him there once had been an in-

scription, now worn smooth. He tried to trace out the message, but it was too weathered. Only four numerals, more deeply carved, remained. 2 . . . 3 . . . They almost followed the whorls of his fingertips. 96 . . .

Cafter sat on a bench until the darkness was complete. He faced south, the direction of the desert road and the elevated tracks to Els. Near the horizon, the stars were like the eyes of desert animals fractionally trapped by firelight, cold and unblinking. Cafter tracked familiar patterns up the night sky to the zenith, where the stars twinkled in many colors. Standing, he turned toward the north, toward the distant center of Cinnabar. He saw the stars flash faster until the constellations merged in a white glow above the city's center.

Lights in the street switched on and the trees, grass and benches were very real again, and the dark sky receded. Cafter slowly walked back to the Coronet. More than thirty ground cycles were now parked outside the inn and Cafter had to thread his way carefully through a garden of steel.

The noise—he had to push through it like a second door as he entered the Coronet. The synthesizer was turned up and it shored the human decibels with a deep heavy beat from the percussion section.

Leah's table was vacant so Cafter sat there. He saw that all the tourists had gone. The front room was crowded now with cyclers, giant muscular men with their giant muscular women. All were identically dressed in filthy trews, an ancient Indian swastika, recalled from a past fantasy, sewn as a patch on the back of each sleeveless jacket. All, male and female alike, were shaved hairless. The air smelled of beer farts, sweat and urine. The smaller tables had been shoved aside in the right half of the room and a billiard table installed. Among the cyclers' rough patterns stalked the bouncers Enrique and Gonzago: not furtive, nor obtrusive, but with an air of

readiness. Behind the bar Matthias Kaufmann poured beers in mechanical succession.

"Everything meshes so well," said Cafter quietly.

"Sir, may I help you?"

Cafter looked up at the girl. "Dark beer." All the serving girls had blue eyes.

"Right away, sir." All the serving girls wore their long blonde hair in braids.

Balancing an empty tray, she moved off toward the bar. Did all the serving girls perform identically well in bed? Cafter pleasantly pondered the thought.

He sat beer-sipping for an hour as the Coronet clock-worked along. Then—the alien intrusion:

1) A man nearly two and a half meters high, a head taller than any of the cyclers. He was heavily muscled in proportion and his skin was the blue-black of the sky before rain.

2) A dwarf dressed in yellow and purple motley. He carried two silver cases, slung by leather straps so that one rested on either hip.

3) A slim albino girl who carried a multi-lensed camera, gleaming and faceted like a spider's eye.

The trio entered the Coronet single file, gingerly protecting their equipment from lurching cyclers. No one seemed to notice them except Cafter.

The crew trekked through the sweaty bodies in an arc whose apogee was Cafter's table. Ignoring the seated man, the albino and the dwarf placed their gear in front of his glass.

"I'll get us a pitcher," said their leader. He started for the bar.

"Make it quick, Trillinor," said the dwarf.

Cafter sat still, looking up at the albino girl and across at the dwarf, both of whom stood with their backs to him. Trillinor took a pitcher of beer from the bar in front of Kaufmann. The innkeeper didn't acknowledge

the usurpation; he just picked up a clean pitcher from the towel behind him and placed it under the spout.

"That's a nice camera," said Cafter.

The girl and the dwarf slowly turned. The dwarf looked at Cafter, beside him, above him, behind him. "Did you hear it?"

"I think so, Reg." The girl's brow wrinkled delicately.

"I said that's a nice camera."

"I did!" said Reg.

"It sees it!" said the girl.

"Sees what?" Trillnor was back, his long fingers wrapped around a pitcher of dark beer.

"The camera!" said Reg. "It said it sees it. And Fiona heard it too."

The girl nodded.

"Of course I see the camera," said Cafter. "Do you think the bloody thing's invisible?"

The trio stared at him. Then Trillnor swiftly bent and grabbed Cafter by the collar, hauling him out of the chair. With the other hand the giant slapped Cafter hard twice, then dropped him back into the chair. He swayed, putting his palms on the table for support.

"You still see the camera?" demanded the dwarf.

"Yes, I—" Cafter had time to say. Trillnor sent him sprawling with another openhanded slap.

"No more," Fiona urged. "You'll damage it."

Cafter, half sitting up with the support of his elbows, had the sense to say nothing.

"We'd better report this to Leah," said Reg.

"Agreed," said Trillnor. "Get your gear."

The other two picked up the camera and the silver cases. Again in single file, the trio reached the door and exited. The girl Fiona glanced back at Cafter expressionlessly.

Cafter painfully got up and replaced his overturned chair. He wished there were something stiffer to drink; then gulped the remainder of his beer. Cafter tapped the

empty glass on the table. Blood trickled to the end of his nose and began to drip on the table. It tickled slightly.

At the bar, Kaufmann struck a serving girl with his fist. Too hurried, she had dropped a full pitcher.

It was time.

"Do you *like* working for Kaufmann?" Cafter asked.

"Oh yes," said the serving girl. "Very much, sir."

"Even when he hits you?"

"Well . . ." She looked demurely at the planking. "After all, sir, he *is* the innkeeper."

"But wouldn't you like to stop working and become a tourist? You know, wear a shirt with an alligator totem over the heart? Sit around the Coronet all day and eat fruit ices?"

"Awwr . . . no, sir." The half-witted busboy wagged his head vehemently. "Aah! No sir!"

"Well," said Cafter. "Well." He hesitated. "What would you like to be?"

The busboy looked at him doubtfully. "Anything?"

The organizer nodded.

The beatific smile drew Cafter's gaze away from the crazed eyes. "Oh, sir! I wanna be a cycler."

Cafter smiled weakly.

"This drudgery needn't continue."

The first cook, arms akimbo, appraised Cafter. "Drudgery? God, I've gave the best years of my life here in this kitchen." She sighed and Cafter couldn't help turning away from her foul breath. "I got to taste everything I spices," she said apologetically.

"How about you?" Cafter said, addressing the other cook. "Wouldn't you like to see working conditions improve?"

"Me? God, I've gave the best years of my life here in this kitchen."

"You're being exploited."

"Not me," said Enrique, smugness obtruding. "I got a good thing with the boss. Pay's not bad. Course it's a little dangerous once in a while." He shrugged. "But hell, that's what I'm paid for."

"Me too," said Gonzago.

"You've been disturbing my employees," said Kaufmann.

"I've been encouraging group solidarity," said Cafter.

"Hasn't worked, huh?" The innkeeper stacked the clean glasses in a neat pyramid. His motions were quick and sure.

Cafter wanted to topple the pyramid of glasses. "No."

"Well, it won't."

"Any particular reason?"

Kaufmann placed a glass on the apex. "It's the natural order of things."

My heart isn't in this, meditated Cafter.

They found him in one of Cinnabar's many pocket parks. Cafter was bent over the verge of an old stone fountain, watching a sun dial. Further out, three sprays hung a fine curtain in the afternoon. Closer, the sun dial was a clear cyrstal disc with intaglio numerals. It was suspended over a half-meter maelstrom where the water was sucked away to be recirculated.

Cafter dropped a brown-veined leaf into the whirlpool and watched it rotate clockwise; slowly at first, then faster until it finally whirled down the vortex in the center.

He felt a hand touch his shoulder and without looking, covered it with his own. "It was a very long night," he said.

"It was a longer month," said Leah.

He finally turned his head and looked beyond Leah to the little group standing in the crescent-shaped shadows

of a kama tree; giant Trillinor, dwarf Reg and coral-eyed Fiona. "What have they to do with you?"

"They work with me," said the girl. "They are my recording crew."

"You know my next question."

"Historical documentaries, mostly. My specialty. I'm still a novice."

"You?"

"I direct." Her fingers traced a line along his jaw, almost a caress.

Cafter winced as she touched one of the bruises. "Your man Trillinor—he's none too gentle."

"He told me," Leah said. "When you evidenced seeing the crew, he knew your conditioning had broken. He thought he could jog you back into repair."

"Repair." Bitterness underlay the word. "You refer to me as a thing rather than a man."

Leah said nothing, continuing to stroke his face.

"When I walked out of the desert," said Cafter. "That's when I suspected my humanity. Two lovers asked about my crossing the desert." His head dropped forward. "Reality is my deadliest enemy."

"As it is of us all," Leah murmured.

"But I still like you," said Cafter. "Whoever you are. Whatever." He paused. "I expect in me that's aberration. Still, I don't suppose that . . ."

She said nothing.

"No, I suppose not." Cafter gazed into the fountain and saw a shadow lengthen over the rippling water. He closed his eyes as Trillinor gently touched a nerve center in the back of his neck.

The giant picked up Cafter's body and carefully cradled it. "Wonky simulacra," he said, head shaking slowly. Leah continued to face the stone fountain.

One day a man came into sight on the road to Cinnabar.

"Ready for retake," said Trillinor.

Leah sat at her usual table in the Coronet waiting for Kaufmann to bring an iced ginger ale. As always in Cinnabar, the day was warm. Yet Leah shivered. She waited for the player to arrive, and wondered if perhaps someone in Cinnabar were recording a documentary on directors.

This is a simple story of an ordinary woman, in an ordinary situation . . . but only if you accept the premise that the development of Intelligent Man was anything but an ordinary occurrence . . .

THE TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

James E. Gunn

"When a machine comes in the door," Grandma Carey used to say, "happiness goes out the window."

Sara sat on the vinyl-covered davenport, savoring a second cup of breakfast coffee and that carefree, what-will-I-do-today moment after the children are off to school, and wondered why she had thought of Grandma Carey. It wasn't that she never thought about Grandma—after all, it was Grandma who had moved in and raised Sara and her brothers after their mother had died—but she seldom really thought about Grandma.

She listened to the metallic sounds the mechanic made in the furnace room as he put the finishing touches on the central air conditioning. Maybe that was the reason. Grandma would have hated all this—her house torn up by workmen, her cleaning schedule disrupted, dust settling over everything, making her sneeze.

Sara sneezed.

But most of all Grandma would have hated the machinery. She would have hated it totally, as she did everything, with all her thin, untiring body, with her sharp mind and her bright blue eyes, with her wrinkled face and her unwithered heart.

Grandma wouldn't allow a machine in her house. Until the day she died, she washed the family's dirty clothes on a scrub board.

It did no good to argue with her, but Dad never learned. "Why break your back and wear out your fingers?" he would say. "We may not be rich, but we can afford a washing machine."

"If you want to waste your money on one of those new-fangled gadgets for tearing up clothes," Grandma would say, "I can't stop you. But you can't make me use it." She lived to be ninety-three and was working right up to the day she died.

Sara couldn't remember now whether Grandma had actually done a wash that day or whether everybody said afterward that it would be just like her. Just as she couldn't remember which one of her brothers, after one of those arguments between Grandma and Dad, had snickered and whispered to the others, "Don't get a machine to tear up your clothes; let Grandma do it."

On Sara's wedding day, Grandma had frowned at the dining room table laden with wedding gifts. Half of them, it seemed, were appliances: toaster, waffle iron and sandwich grill, mixer, iron, radio and record player. "Maybe you can't take them all back," Grandma said, "but you don't have to let them use you. Put them away somewhere, Sarey. Men make machines but they don't understand them. Machines make labor; they don't save it. Machines are against us. Don't ever forget it."

People who had known Grandma when she was young said that Sara, blonde and slim and strong, took after her. But Sara had never felt about machines like Grandma did. As a teenager, Sara thought it made her family seem queer. As an adult, she merely thought it was absurd.

Sara sneezed again, blew her nose, and took another sip of coffee. It had turned lukewarm while she was sitting there thinking.

If Grandma could have seen the house now, she'd have turned her thin hands over, palms up, in dismay and supplication and said, "Sarey! You forgot!"

But life was different now. There were more things to

do and to enjoy, more demands upon a woman's time, more things expected of her. The technological revolution had liberated her from menial toil, and society expected her to do her duty, to be a person not just a woman and a drudge. She had to be able to talk about last night's TV special, this month's magazine articles, this year's best seller. And then there were PTA meetings, her sorority alumnae meetings, bridge club, charity drives, an occasional party . . . these things took time. You had to steal it with labor-saving devices and shortcuts.

Sometimes Greg would get fed up with his job and their lives, and would talk about moving out—"Way out," he'd say, "where the kids can have a lake for a front yard and a forest for a playground." He was an advertising copywriter, and he talked like that. "I can do freelance work to buy the groceries and maybe write that novel I've been talking about."

He had found just the place, but golly!—no electricity, no telephone, not even central heating or indoor plumbing. Grandma would have loved it, but Sara was a child of another age.

"Okay, Mrs. Sanders," the mechanic said. He was young and clean and efficient. Sara liked him, but she wasn't going to like calling him back to fix the air conditioning when it broke down. It always did, whatever it was. "Look, here on the wall, this is the thermostat, just like for the furnace. Set it and forget it."

That was straight out of the commercial. "How low can I keep it?"

"A house this size," he said, masculine and expert, "it'll bring down 30-35 degrees under outside. Most of the time, though, you won't want it that cold. You got a good machine there, a lot of power, what they call 'unused capacity,' to take care of the unusual. Find out what seems comfortable and leave it there." He collected his tools and departed.

Sara set the thermostat at 78 degrees. That was a good temperature; that's where she set the furnace in the winter. Greg used to tease that she had only a span of two degrees when she was comfortable, between 77 and 79.

In the furnace room the air conditioner began to purr, Blake's tiger, contented. Soon cool drafts began pushing their way from the perimeter registers. Outside, the sun beat down on the east exposure and the roof—the weatherman had forecast nearly 100—but, inside, the windows shut tightly, the drapes drawn, she was wrapped in a cool cocoon, insulated from the world. Even the noises of traffic and pre-school children were muffled and distant.

She could feel tension draining out of her body and energy pouring in. She was glad now that they had decided to put in the central unit with all its bother and all its extra expense. Over her swept a wave of appreciation for the age that could perform miracles like this.

She stood up and walked to the kitchen, put her empty cup into the dishwasher with the other breakfast dishes, and pushed the button that turned it on. Hot water began spurting into the machine, and a moment later the rotor began swishing the detergent and hot water around inside. The dishwasher was only two years old, a real youngster, and she loved it for the way it got dirty dishes out of sight and brought them back all clean and sterilized.

The vacuum cleaner was seven years old; it had been bought for the first rug. She was still very fond of it and its deep roar. She pushed it across the rug, and it ate up the lint and dust, though not as hungrily as it had done once. It needed fixing again, maybe a new brush.

Before the sweeper had come other, smaller appliances: the popcorn popper for Greg and the deep-fat frier for her, although neither one had been much of a success.

In a few minutes the house was clean and straight, and

she was hot. The thermometer registered 78. It was funny: 78 felt a little on the coolish side in the winter but now it felt hot. Temperature was mostly psychological, she guessed.

"Thermometers lie," Grandma would have said. "I guess I know when I'm hot."

Sara turned the thermostat down to 72.

She gathered up the used towels and the dirty clothes in the bathroom—why couldn't Greg and the kids learn to put them in the hamper?—sorted them in the utility room, and dropped the towels and white things into the washer. She closed the lid and turned it on. The washer cleared its throat and began filling.

This was washer number two. Washer number one had come just after the sweeper, the refrigerator, the stove, the automatic coffeemaker, the television set, the deep fryer and the electric fry pan, the steam iron, and then the matched washer and dryer . . .

That was her true love, the dryer.

Lunch would be simple: bean soup and peanut butter sandwiches. But dinner would have to be removed from the freezer now if it was anything that had to thaw. The frozen shrimp. There were still several packages—french fries, too, and corn. But the ice cream was all gone and so was the last frozen pie.

She would make a cake. In the cupboard was a chocolate readymix. It was the kind you added an egg to. Greg said she liked that kind because it made her feel virtuous, as if it weren't really a mix after all.

Well, it was silly to go to all the bother of starting from scratch when the mix made a better cake.

By the time the washer got through, the mix, egg, water, and all, was in the mixing bowl. Sara put the towels and white things in the dryer and the good colored clothes in the washer.

She started the mixer and shivered. Now it was too cold. She went back to the living room. The thermometer said 68. The thermostat was set where she had put it last: 72. Sara turned it up to 75.

The air conditioning was going to be one of *those* machines, she was afraid—the kind that didn't work right at first, that had to be broken in or something. Now the repairman would live with them for days at a time. Sometimes machines never did work right, like the humidifier, and finally everybody just gave up.

She couldn't call about the air conditioner yet. She would feel silly. Later, if it kept on acting up, her outrage at an expensive machine that wouldn't work would overwhelm her reluctance to complain.

Besides, it might start working before the repairman got here. Machines did that. Merely calling a repairman seemed to fix them—like the time the TV hissed for everyone but the repairman.

She hated the way they acted then. They would be polite, and they would nod understandingly, but underneath they would feel masculine and superior.

"They don't understand machines," Grandma Carey would have said. "How they lie in wait for a body, obedient when it doesn't matter, then failing when you need them most, when someone will get hurt or even killed."

She would wait, Sara decided, and have Greg call them.

She put on her old red sweater and went back to the mixer. Probably it had been mixing too long. Some mixes were like that. She used a rubber spatula to scrape the batter from the sides of the rotating bowl.

She could almost see Grandma shaking her head. "It's not an easy thing to be a woman, Sarey, and you've got it too easy. You'll have to pay, and you'll pay by not being a woman. You're an extension of that machine. You're

that machine's way of making a cake. As soon as it can turn itself off, pour the cake into a disposable pan, and slip it into the oven, you'll be unnecessary. You'll be disposable, too."

Sara felt light-headed. "Don't be silly, Grandma," she said, knowing she was talking to herself, not caring.

"You're the goose," Grandma snapped, "surrounding yourself with the Devil's tools. Killed your mother, and they'll kill you."

"Nonsense, Grandma. Accidents happen. People get careless." Her mother had been careless, leaving that sweeper cord stretched across the top of the basement stairs. It was easy to understand how Grandma got that way. Lots of people with few of Grandma's reasons believed that machines were perverse, that there was a devil in them, that they were alive and malevolent.

Sara screamed and whipped back her hand. With the other she yanked the cord of the grinding mixer out of the wall outlet. Somehow the spatula had slipped between the beaters, plucking it out of her fingers, rapping her knuckles with the handle. She had her knuckles to her mouth. She was crying with pain.

After a few moments the pain ebbed and she looked at her knuckle. She could move her finger a little; apparently the knuckle wasn't broken. Tomorrow, though, it would be swollen and stiff.

The mixer was still smoking, and the cake batter was full of shredded plastic and splintered wood. They just wouldn't have dessert tonight. It would be good for them.

Sara shivered again and sneezed. Even through the sweater she could feel the cold. Now she was angry enough to call the company. The house couldn't warm up before they arrived, and they couldn't suspect her of turning the thermostat 'way down and then complaining. Could they?

The thermometer said 64. No wonder she felt cold! She picked up the telephone and started to dial, but there was no dial tone. She dialed anyway, but nothing happened. The phone was dead.

"See?" said Grandma Carey.

Sara felt a flash of panic; she would freeze! No, that was ridiculous. She could always turn the thing off, unplug it or something. She opened the door to the furnace room. There stood the furnace, blue, upright, boxy, with handles and doors and pipes and wires and switches, but now it was more complicated and frightening than ever. It looked like an octopus. She shut the door quickly and leaned against it. She would only electrocute herself or wreck something.

But she could open the windows. She unlatched the window next to the kitchen and tugged at it. Stuck! When you wanted to raise them, they were always stuck. She yanked with both hands, forgetting her knuckle, and then the pain came and she had to let go.

She panted with pain and exertion. Suddenly she stopped panting and held her breath. She listened. The washer was silent. It was too soon. She couldn't have told anyone how long it took to wash a load, but she knew, without thinking about it, when the washer was supposed to shut off, and this was too soon.

There was smoke, too—more smoke than the mixer could have made. Sara ran to the utility room. The smoke got thicker in the kitchen; she coughed.

The washing machine was stopped; smoke was pouring out of it. Something was stuck; the motor was burning. Holding her nose, her eyes squeezed shut, Sara groped past the washer for the cord. Her heart pounded; her lungs ached.

A tingling raced through her fingers, up her arm and shoulder. When it reached her head, everything went black . . .

Someone was shaking her. Someone was shouting, "Sarey! Sarey! Wake up! The house is on fire!" It sounded like Grandma Carey.

In the smoke, choking, Sara struggled to her feet, ignoring the pain in both hands. Tears streamed down her face.

She stumbled blindly into the kitchen. It was a nightmare place, everything gray, distorted, fear-shaped. She searched for the telephone. She had to call the fire department, the operator, Greg, somebody.

There was time for the absurd thought: Joan and Don will be home soon, and there will be no lunch ready. . . .

As she felt along the wall for the telephone, her foot caught on something and she fell. Her elbow cracked against a dining room chair. Her knee smashed against the floor. She cried out from the pain, but somehow she kept from fainting and sat up, disentangling the sweeper cord from her feet.

And she knew the truth. Grandma was right. Machines were against people, hated them. They waited for people to make a mistake, to need them, and then they struck. Machines were responsible for more fatalities than all the wars and homicides in history. They thundered like maddened water buffaloes along the highway; they waited pantherlike in the home.

Sara knew it was true because she had put away the sweeper. She distinctly remembered winding up the cord and wheeling the traitorous thing into the closet.

She felt hurt that the sweeper had joined the conspiracy against her. She had always treated it like one of the family, emptying its bag frequently—sometimes before it was even quite full—cleaning the brush of string and thread, getting a new cord when the old one had worn thin.

She felt calm now that she knew what was happening.

She would have to be smarter than they were, that was all. She finished unwinding the snaky cord from around her ankles. She stood up painfully, found the telephone, lifted the receiver. She couldn't see the dial for the smoke and the tears in her eyes, but she felt for the "O" and dialed it.

She listened to the long clicking, the pause, and then the infuriating beep of the busy signal. It always happened when you needed the telephone badly. Now she knew why.

It was no use fighting on their battleground, she thought, and recognized that it was true: this house was theirs, not hers, and it always had been. She had to get out of the house. Here she was at the mercy of their conspiracy. Her job now was to save herself.

The telephone cord tried to strangle her as she turned blindly toward the door. She pulled it off. They were frantic now that she was trying to get away. She knew their secret; they had to stop her.

As she limped and stumbled through the billowing smoke, the terrifying incongruity of the fire and the chill in the air almost overcame her. It must be almost freezing, she thought.

Getting to the door was like finding a way through unexplored territory strewn with hidden perils. Chairs were out of place. The rug slipped when she stepped on it. A lamp fell across her feet, its cord writhing.

She didn't let anything break her concentration. She moved slowly, cautiously.

At last she reached the door. She clung to the door knob, exhausted by her effort. She summoned strength from an unsuspected reserve and turned the handle with her burnt right hand and pulled.

The door stuck.

"No!" she whimpered. "No!"

She grabbed the knob in both hands, ignoring the pain, and tugged frantically. The door was immovable.

"Help me, Grandma!" Sara cried out.

"The window, Sarey," Grandma said. "Break it. Raise your foot and strike it firmly with your heel. Now, Sarey!"

The window shattered. The warm air came in from outside, pushing back the cold, blowing away the smoke.

"Mommie!" Joan said from inside the house. "Where are you?"

"Mom!" Don said. Where was his voice? "Why is the house all full of smoke?"

Sara turned back.

"Sarey!" Grandma said. "It's that new-fangled thing, the tape recorder. Get out now! Now, I said."

And Sara closed her eyes and felt her way out the window, hearing the children crying for help behind her . . .

Someone's arms were around her, strong and familiar, lifting her up. "Greg!" she whispered. "The kids!"

"They're okay," Greg said, his voice comforting. "They're at the neighbor's. They saw the house smoking and called for help and then for me."

Sara opened her eyes. Everything was white. It was a hospital room.

"You've got some bad cuts and burns and bruises, too," Greg said. "You must have had a time of it. Poor Sara!"

"The house?"

"A one-in-a-million accident, the chief said—a sudden overload, a defective fuse that didn't blow—how many different appliances did you have on? Well, the house was insured. We'll build again, bigger and better."

"Way out," Sara said. "Where the kids can have a lake for a front yard and a forest for a playground."

"Sara! Do you mean that?" Greg asked.

A little later he asked how she had got all tangled up in the garden hose. "The chief said he found one loop around your throat!" But Sara didn't tell him. The truth

was something you couldn't tell anybody—unless you had a saving reputation for eccentricity like Grandma Carey, or you could wrap it up as fiction.

But that was for later. Right now her job was to bring up her family safely, far from the conspiracy of machines. Grandma Carey had managed. So would she.

All things must someday come to an ending, but even in disintegration there will be responsibility . . . and even duty . . .



ELEPHANTS

K. M. O'Donnell

It is very dark. The juggler grins, flicks the clubs from one hand to the next: orange, yellow—dim flashes of light striking out. Quick movement then: dim impact of sky to the frozen earth. The last! The last! The Last Juggler!

They watch, nine of them, ten of them, on the bare fields before the stand. Watching the juggler. What unusual intentness! But this *is* the last time. Afterward will come the trapeze, the lions, perhaps a sword eaten whole. And then, finally, the elephants.

But first the juggler. The First of the Last. He prances a little on this, the last night.

"Come," the boy says to the two who are with him. "Come closer. Watch. Maybe we can touch him."

The two say nothing, solemn little girls in pastel dresses (dreams?), lollipops dangling unheeded from their mouths. They have seen so much: fire, disease, loss. And now a juggler. The girls are Six and Eight.

The boy speaks impatiently. "We'll miss it if we don't go now!" He tugs at them, urging them on. There is always the possibility that the juggler might sign his autograph for them—perhaps on a piece of paper, perhaps in the sand. The boy is Ten: an age of significance.

The juggler speaks from his place on the parapet. "And now I will do my final trick! The end of all jug-

pling!" He sighs, winks, tips his belled cap at the sky. "Watch closely, for it is most definitely the last!"

He hurls four, five, six—ah, a Great Man!—clubs into the air, watches them distantly, catches them, flings them one by one into the night. They fall elsewhere, and there is the sound of mud belching, absorbing the falling clubs. The juggler salutes the clubs.

"That is it," he says. "The last. There is no more."

He bows, scrapes his palms. "No applause," he reminds them. "Juggling is finished." He jumps nimbly off the parapet, runs behind the huge tent.

"We missed him," says the boy.

The girls say nothing, staring at the empty stage, hands now on their lollipops. The other watchers wink at them; they are the only children in the crowd . . . except that there are no children there at all. There is barely anybody for the final performance.

"Watch what comes next," says an old man. He nods confidentially. "Lions. Trapeze nets. Elephants. Isn't that nice?"

"Very," the boy agrees, but he is thinking of other things: of the juggler who is behind the tent, never to be seen again. "Stop that," he says to Six, who is scratching her palm insistently with the fingernail of one hand. "Don't do that. You know what'll happen."

"What?" asks Six.

"Your hand will fall off."

"Oh." She is not really interested; she cannot imagine a hand falling off. She takes some gum from a pocket, slips it past the lollipop and chews.

"It turns black first," said the boy. "Then it falls off. Give me some gum."

Lights have come up on the parapet again. A man enters with a carrying case. He drops the case, opens it. Two rabbits spring out, dignified as only rabbits can be. They roll on the stage. They are the Last Rabbits, of course.

"Good evening," the man says. "Welcome."

Someone applauds, then remembers the condition. The applause trails off, as though he is ashamed to quit all at once.

"The Last Magic Show," says the man. "And I am the Last Magician."

The rabbits peer at one another. He lifts them, holds them together, touches their noses gently. The rabbits blink, touch tongues. The magician laughs.

"Vanish," he says. He does something with a hand. The rabbits disappear; suddenly they are on the other side of the parapet.

"Watch closely," he says.

The rabbits are dancing. Their forepaws mesh, cling, they rise to a stiff posture. The magician claps his hands, softly, remembering. The rabbits lumber.

"Dancing rabbits," says the magician. "The Last Dancing Rabbits."

"I don't like this," says Six. "It isn't nice."

"Now they fly!" says the magician. The two rabbits flick out, vanish, reappear on the roof in confusion. The magician salutes them.

"Vanish!" he says.

They do.

The magician stares after them a moment, then turns to the audience. "And now, I need a volunteer."

"He was cruel to the rabbits," says Six. "He didn't have to do that. Now they're dead."

"Quiet," says the boy. He is Ten: he knows of life. Rabbits are born, rabbits die. It is the way of the universe. A condition of existence. Remember the condition. "It's only a trick."

"They're dead," said Eight, speaking for the first time, and taking Six's hand. "She's wrong about most things, but she's right about the rabbits. They're both dead."

"Quiet," says the boy again. "It doesn't make any difference."

"A volunteer!" the magician calls. "For my final trick!"

"I won't go," said Six. "He's cruel."

"Not me," says Eight.

The adults are looking at the children. "You ought to go," the old man says, but the three aren't certain which one of them he is addressing.

"They don't want to," says the boy.

"How about you?"

"Magician shows are for children," a young woman says. "One of you should volunteer—it isn't fair!"

"Not me," Eight repeats. "I ain't no rabbit."

"Volunteer?" begs the magician. He seems to be whining.

The boy shrugs, raises his hand. "I'll go. I volunteer."

The magician looks him over from the parapet. "I don't know. How about one of the girls?"

"They don't want to."

"It's only a little trick."

"Let me," the boy says.

The magician shrugs, turns his back. When he faces them again he has a different face, somewhat younger, with untrimmed mustache. "All right, little boy," he says. "Come on then."

Ten pats Six on the head, tweaks Eight by the ear, touches both for luck. He passes through the others—who after all are hardly a crowd—and hops on the stage. And now the boy finds that the magician is drunk. A peculiar foul smell comes from the man's clothing and his lips. He touches the boy. Up closer he is much older, which seems strange; the boy knows little of showmanship.

"Do you play well at vanishing?" the magician asks.

"Sometimes. But I don't want to vanish."

"It will just be for a while."

"They're with me." He points to Six and Eight. "They need me."

"You'll be right back. It only takes a second."

The boy sighs, arguments useless. "Vanish me."

The boy hears some rustling behind him, almost applause, as people strain the condition to the limit. The magician darts to a side, brings back a large box, placing it center stage. A deep box, with the cover open.

"In," he says.

"Wait. What will you do to me?"

"Not a thing; I'll do it all. Get into the box, please."

He has adopted a professional manner, a professional kindness.

The boy wonders if Six and Eight can see into the box. He hopes not. It is black inside, with speckles of white and green.

"It's very dark in there," he says.

"Of course it's dark. How did you think it would be?"

"But it's so very dark!"

"When you come out, even the night will seem bright. Into the box, please!" Again the magician seems whining, although he also seems much more sure of himself.

The boy shrugs, places a foot delicately inside. A dampness comes over his foot, passes up his leg.

"I don't like it in there," he says.

"Don't be silly. You volunteered."

"I don't volunteer."

"It's too late. You already have. Get in!"

"No!"

The magician pauses, fondles his chin, considering the audience. "He doesn't want to go in," he says. "Will anyone take his place?"

The boy hopes that even Six or Eight might volunteer, but he hears nothing. After a moment the magician says, "You see? You volunteered, and no one else will take your place. You must go through with it. Now get into the box."

The boy shrugs. He is committed to the point where

even he can recognize commitment. He gets into the box, puts his arms at his side, looks up at the sky.

The magician leans forward, pats the boy gently on the forehead. "Just relax." He closes the lid.

The boy tries to relax. There are stars inside the box.

"The Last Vanishing!" he hears the magician say.

Six and Eight are fascinated. Next will be the lion tamer, and the the sword swallower. And then the elephants. The elephants must always be saved for the very end.

They plan to volunteer to ride them.

*Today, the world is too wise for magic. But once both
we and the planet were younger . . .*

THE OTHER WAY AROUND

Howard L. Myers

For a score of days the chronicler Raedulf had sought the magician, trailing him on uncertain information obtained from sulky peasants, importuning mendicants and cautious bandits encountered along the way.

The going was often difficult. The magician followed the weedy Roman roads only when they seemed to suit his odd fancy. Nor did he confine his course to the wandering byways and riding paths.

It was as if, thought Raedulf, the magician were impatient with the routes of ordinary men, pushing his way instead through whatever bog and bramble stood between him and his destination.

Why, then, was the course he took so far from straight?

Raedulf was minded of some mighty knight bereft of his senses by too many blows on the head in too many jousts, mounting his charger and clattering hither and yon while convinced he was riding straight into the face of the foe.

"Yea, I encountered an ancient such as you detail," said a young friar met on the old road along the River Kennet. "We talked somewhat, but I fear he will find meager favor in the eyes of our Redeemer. There was no charity in the man."

Raedulf took the hint and dropped two coppers in the young man's hand. "Did he say whither he journeyed?"

"No, gracious sir, nor whence he came. He was hard of speech and arm, and I did not deem it prudent to question him closely. He seemed of a sudden humor."

Raedulf nodded. All reports indicated the magician was indeed a man of temper. "Did he say ought to you of his errand?"

"Nothing. He tested my knowledge on various matters, sneering at my replies, then whirled and strode away. He muttered foully at what he called my ignorance of the Old Stones."

"I know little of the Old Stones, myself," said Raedulf, "except that they stand somewhere in this region of Briton."

"They form a round figure, and are ten leagues south and west from here. That was all I could respond to the ancient's test."

Radedulf grew alert. "He wished to know where the Old Stones stand, then?"

"Why . . . I think not. Seemingly he knew, and was but trying my knowledge." The friar hesitated with pucker'd face. "Think you the ancient scamp made a pretense of trying me, to hide his own ignorance?"

Raedulf replied, "The ancient scamp seems capable of that—or of most anything."

The friar uttered an unchristian oath. "I am shamed to have been awed! A fraud!"

"It is perhaps well you were," said Raedulf. "This ancient may travel like a bull both crazed and lost, but like the bull he has horns with which to gore."

After proper farewells, Raedulf turned his mare and rode westward along the road, watchful for a good way trending more to the south. By and by he found a side road that proved well-frequented, with a fair scattering of villages and farm stockades along the way.

Through the afternoon he rode at a comfortable pace, having no need for hurry if the magician were indeed making for the Old Stones. The magician traveled afoot

and would easily be outpaced to the destination by Raedulf's mare.

The chronicler found a comfortable inn for the night, and there obtained clearer information on the location of the Old Stones and how they might best be reached. He was also warned that the Stones were in outlaw-infested country, to which he nodded solemnly, thinking of how many times he had received similar warnings during this quest, and of how he had yet to meet a brigand who cared to challenge a man who was mounted and wearing a sword.

If he rode in fear of any man, Raedulf mused, that man might best be the very one he was seeking.

Late the following afternoon he reached the Old Stones. They rose above the thick brush of the deserted heath like some primitive colonnade. Raedulf stared at them in wonder. Here was surely a thing that should be better chronicled. Who had raised these great stone slabs on end along a circling line, and had spanned many of their tops with massive lintels?

Certainly they were not the work of the Romans. They had not the style of Roman structures. And they appeared far too old.

Allowing his mare to stroll along what paths she could find through the brush, Raedulf explored the place at length, but found nothing enlightening. Here and there were ashes of campfires, some quite fresh, left by outlaws or outcasts or whoever, but nothing to indicate what the Stones might have once been.

And no sign of the magician. The old man would not reach the place until the morrow, he guessed.

With that thought, he turned his mount back the way he had come, toward the stockade of a peasant-squire he had passed half a league to the north.

He met the magician on the way.

Raedulf had never seen him before, but descriptions made his identity certain. He was a huge man, a head tal-

ler than even King Lort, with a heavy beard of gray and frowning brown eyes. Strapped to his shoulders was a backpack of peculiar design.

The magician halted in the middle of the path, and Raedulf stopped his mare.

"Hail, thou of reowned wisdom!" he called out.

The magician's right hand stole out of sight under his cloak. "Who the hell are you?" he growled.

Taken aback by the strangeness and vehemence of the magician's words, he replied, "Raedulf of Clerwint, good sire, a chronicler in the service of God and His Majesty, Lort."

"Huh! A damned newspaper reporter! Of a sort, anyway. You know who I am?"

"Thou art he who is called Merlin," replied Raedulf, wondering if it would be safe as well as courteous to dismount.

The magician said, "I'm Wilmoth T. Aberlea of Maryland, and if you hayseeds make 'Merlin' out of that, what the hell's the difference to me?" He paused. "Is this a chance meeting, what's-your-name, or were you laying for me?"

"Raedulf of Clerwint," the chronicler supplied, feeling miffed. "I confess to having sought you out, good magicker."

"Okay, Roddy," the magician said brusquely, "let's hear what you want. I'm a busy man."

"In behalf of my leige, sire, I would have of you circumstantial knowledge of the lamented King Arthur."

Merlin stared at him, then chuckled. Raedulf took heart from this display of good humor and dismounted.

"This Lort of yours . . . isn't he the bully boy over in the Leicester neighborhood? What's his interest in Arthur?"

"There is a likeness in the names, Lort and Arthur," Raedulf explained. "My lord wishes to know if there is a tie of blood; if, indeed, he might be heir to the kingdom

of Camelot. And if so, he would have me enquire the whereabouts of that kingdom."

The magician bellowed a gust of laughter, then soured abruptly. "Tell him no," he grunted. "Now pull your pony aside so I can get by, boy."

Raedulf began moving his mare slowly out of the way, hesitant to let the magician move on but fearful of disobeying. "Frankly, renowned magicker," he entreated, "that is not the answer my liege wishes to hear."

"Nuts to your puny leige!" grumbled Merlin as he stomped forward. Raedulf quickly yanked the mare aside as the magician went past, and stood looking helplessly after him.

But a few steps later the magician halted and turned, frowning unhappily. "This Lort of yours . . . he doesn't know his own genealogy?"

"Not precisely, sire," Raedulf replied. "Like the great Arthur himself, my king's origins are confused. Since the departure of the Roman legions, our land has been rife with disorder and civil strife to a degree that families are uprooted and—"

"Okay," snorted Merlin, "I get the picture. What the hell, your boy Lort might even *be* Arthur on some other timeline. Look, tell him what he wants to hear. Tell him he's the third son of Arthur's only child, a daughter named . . . named Merlinette, after me. Say his elder brother was slain in battle and the other has taken Church vows. So that makes him heir. As for Camelot . . ." The magician shrugged. "Tell him it sank, that it was lost in The Wash."

Raedulf bowed stiffly "I extend His Majesty's thanks, gracious magicker."

Merlin was grinning. "You don't believe a word I said, do you?"

"I have obeyed my king's command," retorted Raedulf, "in seeking out and questioning he whose knowledge of Arthur is fullest and most direct of all men still

alive. It remains for me to report accurately your words on the subject."

Merlin chuckled. "Spoken like a true newspaperman!" He applauded. "You ought to go far, although you don't get a mention in any history book I ever read. You know how to lie honestly, and that's a big step toward civilization as I knew it. Maybe that's what I should have encouraged around here, instead of chattering about Arthur and Company. But I suppose it wouldn't have led to a convergence at this early date, and wouldn't have caught on."

The magician fell silent, seemingly lost in speculations beyond Raedulf's ken. Indeed, nearly all the magician had said was mystifying to the chronicler, and rankling as well. There was the insulting suggestion that the accurate recounting of the words of an authority was not necessarily honest. What else was a faithful chronicler to do? And the strange comment that Arthur might be Lort in some other . . . other here-and-now? How could Lort be his own grandfather? But, no, that was Merlin's fabrication . . .

It was much too confusing. To change the subject in his own mind, Raedulf asked, "Does the good magicker seek the Old Stones?"

Merlin frowned down at him. "I *go* to the Old Stones," he corrected. "I seek nothing, because I know the location of all things."

Raedulf gathered his courage and said sharply, "I believe the good magicker shares my ability to lie honestly."

Merlin blinked, then chortled in surprised delight. "Aha! Hoisted by me own petard! You're a clever lad, Roddy. Okay, I know Stonehenge is somewhere on Salisbury Plain, but how the hell to find it in all this damned brush is something else."

"Five furlongs down this path," said Raedulf boredly, "you will be in sight of the top of the Stones."

Merlin studied him in amusement, then said, "I have a

recently seized fowl in my sack, along with other food-stuffs fit for a magician. Come along to the rocks and dine with me, lad. Else I might wind up talking to myself."

"I'm honored, sire," said Raedulf, bowing. "Perchance you would accept the use of my mount, to rest your limbs after so long a journey."

Merlin snorted. "Not on your life! You have to grow up with those stupid animals to understand them. Besides, I'm a jogger from way back. Keeps me in shape."

So Raedulf led his mare and walked at the magician's side. He was less awed now, having bested Merlin in one verbal exchange. Also, he found a touch of comic absurdity in someone exercising (if he had understood correctly), to stay in good walking form . . . the way knights exercised with lance and sword.

"The Old Stones have not a Romish look," he offered.

"They're not Roman," said Merlin. "I'm going to study them, find out what they really are."

"Mayhap I can be of some assistance in this undertaking," Raedulf hinted.

The magician glanced at the younger man. "Think you might pick up some of my magic, boy?"

"You might choose to reward me in that manner, sire. Or perhaps with more of the history of Arthur the King."

Merlin spat a word that was strange to Raedulf, but that sounded obscene nonetheless. "I've shot all the Arthurian bull I intend to," he snapped.

The remark had puzzling implications. But they made it clear the magician did not want to tell more of the great king. "Then perhaps of your own history, good magicker."

"My history you wouldn't believe. Or be a fool if you did. We magicians lead strange lives."

Annoyed at the patronizing tone, Raedulf replied tartly, "You may try me, sire."

"Okay, boy. How about this for a starter: I come from thirteen hundred years in the future."

Raedulf nodded thoughtfully, although he would have guessed that, possessor of the wisdom of the ancients, Merlin had come from the distant past. "Your time must be one of inspired magicianship," he flattered.

Merlin grunted in disdain. "Mediocre. I was the greatest of the lot. Got damned little credit for it, of course. A prophet without honor in my own time," he muttered bitterly. "Not that I gave a damn. I was never one of those security-blanket organization scientists who can't function without coddling and praise. And the lousy Swedes know where they can shove their stupid Nobel Prize, for all I care."

"You are highly honored here, good sire," placated Raedulf, wondering what the old man was raving about.

"Oh, sure! But not understood," snapped Merlin. "A magician with some impressive tricks, but not a brilliant physicist whose discoveries surpassed those of Einstein! Those dolts called me '*simplistic*!'"

"Which dolts, good sire?" Raedulf inquired.

"My damned so-called colleagues! Those biddy-brained idiots who sat in judgement on my work, those referees who insulted my discoveries and kept them from being published!"

"That's the way they buried my theory of subatomic structure, in which I demonstrated that there is only one kind of particle, the neutron. All the other kinds that have multiplied like rabbits in the minds of bought scientists are merely reactions to neutron configurations of flows and counterflows of energy."

"You want to know what the referee said about that? He said I chose to ignore numerous phenomena that failed to fit my scheme. A damned lie! But those party-lining journal jacklegs believed him."

"After that disaster, I didn't even *try* to publish my finding of the equivalence of gravitation and nuclear

binding force. What a laugh some idiot would have had with that one! Everybody *knows* the two forces can't be the same. Gravity's the weaker by too many orders of magnitude to make a relationship thinkable. So nobody but a trouble-maker like me would see a parallel between the neutron stars, in which gravity is so concentrated as to be almost totally self-confining, and the atomic nucleus where binding force is similarly concentrated. Oh, no, I wasn't about to announce that one! I was enough of a joke or a fraud without that hanging over my reputation. Instead, I carried on alone, and brought a consideration of time into the light thrown by my earlier discoveries. And I learned how to time-travel."

He paused, slamming fist into palm.

"That was exactly what I needed. I was a man ahead of my own time, trying to mingle with people far too stupid and backward to appreciate my work or myself. The future was where I belonged, so . . ."

Merlin broke off his angry recital in midsentence, glowering at the path ahead. "How much farther till we see the stones, boy?" he demanded.

"Around yon turning of the path."

"Good. I'm getting hungry. Keep an eye out for firewood."

"Very well, good sire." After a hesitation, Raedulf asked timidly, "But, sire, if you sought the future, how is it that you journeyed into the past?"

Merlin snorted. He strode on in silence, and Raedulf concluded he had asked about a matter that vexed the magician sorely. He was casting about for a graceful change of subject when his companion began muttering, "Even I fell in the intellectual trap. Even I."

He looked at the chronicler and spoke more audibly. "We believe what our society believes, boy, whether we mean to or not. We're tricked, because there are so damned many beliefs and they come at us in so many

shapes and disguises. You believe I'm a great magician, but in my own time no intelligent young man would accept that. He would look for the mirrors, or the sleight-of-hand. Or the scientific explanation. When I tell you I come from the future, you accept that as powerful magic and ask no explanations. But a young man of my era would say, 'Impossible!' Or he might be sharp enough to ask, 'How does it work?' Both reactions would be based on accepted assumptions of the times. They would be proper."

Raedulf nodded slowly. "Even within one time, that is true. The deeds of the Romans oft were senseless to my greatfathers."

"Right!" approved Merlin. "Now, you see that any society's set of beliefs will contain falsehoods, beliefs that contradict the natural scheme of things."

This was a difficult point. In accepting it Raedulf saw that he would be admitting that his own deepest convictions could be in error . . . along with the rulings of his king and the teachings of the Church. He was not prepared for that. But he could pretend in order to stay on pleasant terms with the magician. "It would seem that each group of beliefs would contain its share of truth and its share of falsity."

"Correct!" said Merlin. "And the discerning man cannot test every belief of his society. Most are drilled in when he's too young. And, there are so damned many of them one lifetime isn't long enough to test them all.

"So I accepted a notion about the structure of time that was inaccurate, and as a result I wound up here in the past instead of the future."

Raedulf stared at him. All that lecturing about beliefs merely to justify an error in the magician's time-journeying spell! Surely, Merlin must make few mistakes, to be so perturbed by just one!

"The error must have been profoundly subtle," Raedulf said.

"No, not really; I can explain it to you. If you went back to the time of your father's youth and killed him before he bedded your mother, then you could never have been born and thus could not have killed him, could you?"

"Not unless my mother . . . But then he would not have been my . . . No." Befuddled, he shook his head.

"What would happen?" asked Merlin.

"A pretty riddle," said Raedulf, pausing to jerk some dry brush from the ground for the campfire. "I would think on it."

"I'm not bandying riddles. My question was rhetorical."

"Your pardon, sire," Raedulf responded. "Then I would say, without thinking on it, that upon slaying my father I wouldest must vanish."

"But how could you have existed *until* then?" persisted the magician. "How do you explain this paradox within the laws of nature?"

To cover his hesitation Raedulf began breaking up the brush in his hands as he walked along. He had at least a vague notion of what the magician meant by "laws of nature." This brush, for instance, was a natural thing with its slender trunk and still thinner branches, which he was snapping off to make a compact bundle under his arm. Also, he recalled the magician's earlier mention of "timelines."

"Could it be," he asked, "that time is shaped like a tree? Then if I returned to slay my father, my deed would cause a new branch to sprout at that point—a branch on which I slew my father and vanished."

The magician gasped. "Remarkable! You have duplicated precisely the erroneous belief of my own era, that timelines diverge into the future like the branches of a tree. You are a man of wit. Rodney."

Pleased by the praise but irked at being misnamed, Raedulf said, "Then nature is deceptive in this matter?"

"Only to the extent we deceive ourselves," growled Merlin. "My excuse for being taken in is that I acted in haste. I was too damned eager to get into the future and find an advanced, compatible culture, perhaps even a woman who would measure up to my standards . . . I being a younger man then than now. But here we are. Stonehenge."

"Yes, good sire." Raedulf pointed. "Yon is a partially fallen lintel stone under which others have sheltered before us. Mayhap you will find it a suitable nook."

Merlin walked over to the stone and gave it a hard push. But it was firmly wedged in place against one of the uprights, and was some eight feet above the ground at its higher end. "It'll do," he said. "Tie your pony and hunt some more wood."

Raedulf obeyed, and when he returned the magician had a fire going. "Who's been camping here, Rodney?"

"Outlaws, or so the people hereabouts say."

Merlin snorted. "They better not bother me!"

"I thought on that while gathering wood, sire," replied the chronicler. "The bandits are a cowardly lot, but when we are in our blankets at night they might find us easy prey. Also, this plain abounds in concealment for those of evil intent. I would favor precautions, sire."

"Yeah? Such as what?"

Raedulf lifted his hands in a gesture of ignorance. "I know not what magical protections you have, sire. I merely suggest it would be well to have those protections in readiness."

"Let me tell you something, boy," said the magician. "There's no magic like an alert watchman. Maybe I'll rig up something, but we're going to take turns sleeping. And you'd better not doze on watch, understand?"

"Of course, sire," replied Raedulf grumpily.

But he soon forgot the insult as he watched Merlin remove the limp form of a fat goose from his pack, plus a number of bewitched utensils of light gleaming metal.

The magician put him to work plucking the goose while he busied himself over the fire, often muttering what the chronicler took to be incantations.

The goose was soon broiling on a spit, with frequent basting of a spicy liquid the magician had concocted. Raedulf watched in awe, his mouth watering from the savory odors of the bird and from a small stewpot, as the magician worked his wonders.

The supper was eaten shortly after nightfall by the light of the dwindling fire.

Raedulf picked the last bone clean and sighed contentedly. "Were the victuals so wondrous in Arthur's Court, nolé magicker?" he asked.

Merlin chuckled and sucked his teeth. "Far better than this, lad. The banquets of the Table Round, honoring some worthy knight for valor on a perilous quest, were marvels beyond delight that all but the angels might envy and—" He broke off the recital with an impatient grunt. "Never mind that nonsense!"

Raedulf realized belatedly that he had blundered in bringing up the subject of Arthur. The old magician was obviously bitter about the fall of the great King and the sundering of the Table Round. It was not a matter to remind the magician of.

"I have thought on the shape of time," the chronicler said quickly, "and must confess my thinking comes to naught."

"Small wonder," said Merlin. "You haven't the background to deal with it. You never heard of the expanding physical universe, and wouldn't see the absurdity of the idea that time, too, was expanding through the multiplication of divergent timelines.

"To compensate for the physical expansion of the universe, timelines have to *converge*. One by one they have to be consolidated into fewer and fewer tracks. That's what I should have recognized at the beginning." The magician stared moodily at the embers of the fire.

"That shaping," hazarded Raedulf. "It caused you to journey opposite to your desired course."

Merlin nodded. "I moved toward divergence, which is the only direction one *can* shift in time. A time-traveller can get himself out on a limb, but can't go from limb to trunk. That would compromise all the consolidations that took place during the period covered by his shift. That much I knew, but what I didn't know, didn't bother to realize, was that time branches downward, into the past, not upward into the future. Which makes me an idiot, like everybody else."

"Belittle yourself not, noble sire," Raedulf soothed. "You are renowned above all mortals for wisdom and power, and are spoken of in kingly councils with awe and trembling."

After a pause Merlin said, "I have made my mark on this timeline, at that."

"Indeed you have, sire. However, I confess myself in darkness concerning these timelims bending into the past. If I entered the time of my father's youth and slayed him . . ."

"You wouldn't," said the magician. "Converging timelines solve that paradox by simply not allowing it to happen. If you went into the past, you'd likely find yourself on a limb where your father didn't even exist. Probably you would wind up marrying someone much like your mother and having a son who, when the juncture of your limb and a major branch came, would meld into the Rodneys from other limbs and continue as yourself. So, instead of creating a divergence, you would help bring about a convergence."

"But if I refused to wed the woman with my mother's likeness . . ." Raedulf began.

"You couldn't refuse, if that were the role you were destined to play in bringing the convergence. It wouldn't occur to you to refuse. No more than it occurred to me to . . . well, never mind that. I think you get the picture."

Any point on any timeline can lead to only one future, but is lead to by innumerable pasts, and a jump can be made only to a past where the jumper will fit in. That's orderly nature for you, boy."

The magician rose yawning. "I'm hitting the sack. Take the first watch and wake me around midnight, Rodney."

"Very well, sire."

The magician vanished under the lintel stone and was soon snoring softly.

Raedulf found his mind whirling with the many strange thoughts thrust upon him by the words of Merlin. The foolish question he had asked on behalf of King Lort—to which he had received a false and silly answer—seemed the least important part of his exchanges with the magician.

But he had learned much worthy of detailed chronicling about the magician himself, and about the magical cookery from which delightful flavors still lingered in his mouth.

Why, then, he wondered glumly, did the thought of chronicling these events leave him feeling uninspired?

Thirteen hundred years in the future, the name Raedulf would be forgotten, and his chronicles unheard of.

Why should he care for that? he demanded in self-annoyance. Before this day, he had never given a thought to the durability of his scribings. Why should ambition be destroyed by knowing his work would not survive some thirty mortal lifetimes?

He studied moodily on this, considering such possibilities as Merlin being a minion of Satan—despite his long service to the most Christian of all kings—who had purposely made the discouraging remark to tempt Raedulf away from his God-prescribed duties. Yet the remark had seemed unpremeditated, words carelessly dropped by an abrupt man.

Raedulf sighed and turned to look at the Great Bear in

the northern sky, and estimate how much turning of the Bear would mark the end of his watch.

Perhaps, he mused, knowledge of the future was in all cases evil. Were not seers generally regarded with suspicion and assumed to be of dubious grace? Thus the knowledge the magician had thrust upon him in that one remark was best forgotten, pushed out of his mind.

So Raedulf murmured all the prayers he knew, and shortly felt less depressed.

But still he could not view his future with enthusiasm.

The night passed without incident, except for a few furtive sounds of movement that did not approach the camp and could have been made by straying animals rather than by men.

In the morning Merlin began his study of the Old Stones. He stomped about with great energy, uprooting brush that stood in his way, measuring stones and distances with a magical metal ribbon that lurked in a flat round box except when he drew it forth. He drove stakes, strung lines of yarn hither and yon, took sightings, and scribbled unreadable notations.

Raedulf helped to the extent his ignorance permitted.

"If the Old Stones stand in your future, good sire," he asked once, "could you not have studied them then?"

"I wasn't interested then," Merlin replied distractedly. "And not all the stones are still up in the Twentieth Century. Many will be removed, including the one we slept under. There won't be enough left to put the purpose of the structure beyond dispute."

"Could it be . . ." Raedulf began, and then caught himself. He had nearly brought up the subject of Arthur again, by suggesting the Stones were the underpinnings of a vast Table Round, left from some distant eon when giants strode the earth.

"It's thought to be a religious shrine," Merlin said, sounding cross. "With astronomical implications. Used

for a seasonal celebration. Look, can't you work without asking questions?"

"My apologies, sire."

Thereafter the chronicler spoke less, but the magician grew more irritable as the morning advanced. Finally he turned and snapped, "Look, boy, I work best alone! Always have. If you want to be useful, get on your mare and go get some groceries. See if that squire-peasant up the road will sell you cheese, meat, eggs of recent vintage, wine, cabbages, bread and whatever. Do that and I'll teach you some decent cookery."

"Most willingly, sire," beamed Raedulf, and he hurried to obey. After all, he was sure the magic of the Old Stones would be ever beyond the scope of a mere chronicler, but the magic of the cookpot might be a marvel he could master!

He outdid himself to be a quick student of Merlin's lessons. Thanks to his professionally trained memory, Raedulf could murmur to himself just once a formula given by the magician, and have it firmly fixed in his mind.

Merlin was pleased with him, and kept him busy at the campsite day after day, preparing dishes that took hours in the making. Meanwhile, the magician continued his investigation of the Old Stones.

The brigands attacked on the third night, during the magician's watch. Raedulf was startled awake by a sharp thunderclap of sound so powerful as to leave his ears dazed. He leaped up, tripping on his blanket while groping in the dark for his sword.

"*Avaunt, you beggars!*" he heard Merlin shout above the surprised yelps and brush-threshings of the attackers, and the alarmed whinny of the mare.

"Where are they?" he gasped when he reached the magician's side.

"In disorderly retreat." The magician chuckled in evi-

dent satisfaction. "I winged one of 'em. They won't be back—more likely they'll scram out of this region completely."

"That thunderclap nigh made me do the same," complained Raedulf. "And my mare as well." He hurried over to the animal and soothed her with strokings and soft words.

"That was my magic wand you heard." Merlin laughed. "My thunderwand. My faithful rust-proof roscoe! I'd better show you how it works tomorrow, boy, in case another band shows up during your watch some night."

"Whatever you think wise, sire," Raedulf agreed reluctantly. Using the thunderwand had no appeal for him.

But he listened carefully next morning as the magician explained the wand's functioning. Its proper name, he learned, was "Forty-five Automatic." He handled it as well, but rather gingerly, not daring to touch the portions called "safety" and "trigger."

"Not many rounds left for it," Merlin remarked with regret. "When they're gone I'll bury it, I suppose."

Raedulf wondered if such fearsome magic was often needed in Arthur's Court, protected as it had been by the swords of many valiant knights. But he restrained himself from asking.

They were not disturbed again during the fortnight they remained among the Old Stones. Raedulf surmised that the marauders of that one frightful night had warned others of their kind that demons in human guise lurked amid the Stones.

Then one afternoon Merlin returned to the cookfire only an hour after the midday meal. He sat down and regarded the chronicler thoughtfully.

"I'm through here, Raedulf," he said gruffly, surprising the younger man by, for once, getting his name right. "I'll be moving on, and you'd best be getting back

to Lort with that cock-and-bull story, and to your chronicling."

"Very well, sire, but I have little lust for either."

"Ah? Why not?"

"On our meeting, sire, you remarked that my chronicles are not known in your time of the future. Though I had never thought me to make a lasting impress, I am yet disheartened that my scribings are fated to perish."

"Humpf! I oughtn't to have said that," Merlin grimaced. "Look, boy, maybe your work does survive in a way. All this Arthurian guff I've been spouting gets preserved some way. Maybe your work lasts long enough to get it established in oral tradition."

"Perhaps," said the glum chronicler. "But the word-of-mouth of the Great King and the Round Table is already widespread. Methinks it will endure without my help."

"Yeah, I suppose so," mused Merlin.

"Would that I, like thee, had my lasting impress assured," Raedulf mourned. "Thou art as famed as Arthur himself."

The magician nodded. "And since I *am* Arthur, so to speak—on this timeline at any rate . . ."

"Thou art Arthur?" exclaimed Raedulf.

"In a sense. You see, lad, there was no Arthur on this line. I didn't know that at first. When I learned what century I was in and the people shortened Maryland to Merlin, I naturally assumed I was the historical Merlin of the Arthurian legend. I began trying to find Camelot, and amazing the hayseeds with tales about a great king they'd never heard of. The yokels believed me and repeated my tales as gospel. So, for all historical purposes, this timeline now has an Arthur, and it can converge into other lines in which he really existed."

Raedulf was staring at him in a state of shock.

"Don't take it so hard, boy," the magician snorted.

"I'm not saying Arthur wasn't real. He just wasn't on this line. On other lines . . . well, who's to say?"

After a silence, Raedulf moaned, "I can never bring myself to chronicle this, or even speak of it."

"If you could, I probably couldn't have told you. Can't have the legend doubted at its very beginning." Merlin studied him closely. "Look, boy, you just said you didn't want to chronicle anymore, anyhow. So what the hell. Give it up. Go into some other line of work."

"My training . . ."

"Your training makes you the best damned cook in the world today, myself excluded. Open a restaurant—an inn."

Raedulf blinked. "Could I, perhaps make a more lasting impress in that manner?"

"Not around here, you couldn't!" Merlin chortled. "The cookery on this island is an atrocity through all convergences to come. But I'll tell you what: go over to the Continent. Become a Frenchman. You'll need to do that anyway, to get half the spices I told you about. Do your fancy cookery over there and your impress will last quite a while, believe me!"

After a moment, Raedulf nodded. "I will heed your advice, sire."

"Fine! Now, I must be going."

"May I ask whither?"

"Into the past," said Merlin. "Where else? I know what Stonehenge is, but I still don't know who built it. I'll have to find out by going back and meeting the builders in person."

"And what is the purpose of the Stones, sire?"

"They're the remains of a perpetual clock-calendar, a time-telling device. When Stonehenge was in its complete form, it could tell one the exact date, year, and century. When I arrived in this time, if I had been unable to verify that I had, indeed, leaped thirteen centuries, then

a structure such as this once was could provide me that knowledge."

"It must have been the work of magicians of vast wisdom!" said the awed Raedulf.

"My thought exactly. And there are legends of extremely advanced prehistoric civilizations. As I can't seek in the future for the high cultural climate in which I properly belong, I'll look for it in the distant past. So long, boy!"

Merlin had gathered most of his equipage as he talked and stuffed it in his pack. Now, before the mystified Raedulf could speak, he vanished into empty air, pack and all.

Raedulf did not leave the Great Stones immediately. Instead he wandered the paths opened by Merlin, who had apparently tramped all over the place. Here, untold centuries ago, he mused, magicians perhaps the equal of Merlin himself had labored long to raise the magnificent timepiece of which the Old Stones were the ruined remains.

It would, he decided, have been more practical to keep track of dates by the usual process of keeping records. One chronicler of no great talent could have done that. But perhaps the ancient magicians had reasons beyond his ken.

He intended to prepare food for the road before starting his journey south to the coast, and he needed firewood for that. He wandered toward some dead brush he remembered seeing near the center of the ring of Stones, brush he had previously left untouched because a slender stump of broken stone had blocked his way.

Now that Merlin was gone he no longer needed to concern himself about leaving the stone undisturbed. He pushed hard against it and it tumbled over, out of his way.

On the ground where it had stood was a rust-crusted object. He picked it up and examined it with wide eyes.

Beyond doubt, it was Merlin's thunderwand. The magician had said he would bury it when it had no more vigor.

Instead, he had placed it under the stone. And he had done so at a time so distant that the rust-proofing spell had worn off.

What could have been the occasion? Raedulf couldn't be sure, but suddenly he felt that he could make a good guess.

After all, who more than Merlin himself would need a timepiece that read the centuries? And particularly so if he found himself among untutored primitives who knew nothing of tallying days and years, and who could only slave with their strong backs to serve the great magician who appeared among them.

He guessed that Merlin would indeed make them slave. With no further hope of finding the wonderful magic land for which he longed, he would have little to do but see that the Old Stones were put in their proper place.

He would have to, because it was necessary for convergence.

“And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, My name is legion: for we are many.”—Mark 5:9

LEGION

Russell Bates

The autopilot console glowed suddenly red, and alarms shattered the silence in the car with an explosion of wrenching sound. The driver, half-asleep in his seat, straightened, automatically grabbing for the manual override. But the wheel fought his grasp; there was a sliding sideways, blurs of other vehicles, and then the image of something massive in his path. The shock and explosion came so quickly that he was unconscious before the red flames could register on his retinae. He knew he was dead . . .

Drifting. Endlessly floating: sightless, deaf. Nothing but pain . . . much pain.

Warm—now hot. Pain goes away; drifting . . .

Pain!

Euphoria swirled among the lightning threads of hurt and separated them. Its cooling wash bore height, breadth, mass, descriptive feature.

Light!

The universe was dark: illumination was an impossible concept. There should have been only the eternal drifting . . .

Weight!

Without existence, there was no mass or substance. A

neutrino should possess a universe of mass by comparison. But gravity told a different story.

Cold!

Yesterday was warm: tomorrow would be cold. But today still possessed molecular movement, defeating the final laboratory definition of cold.

Hunger!

Sustenance was unneeded. Two molecules collided, and in the collision gave off nourishment. The process was repeated: two more molecules joined and exploded . . .

Sound and faces!

. . . but he was infinitely alone in overwhelming silence. The universe was a bright point, *there*: unreachable. He floated above it, apart from it, subject only to eternity.

Drifting . . .

The second time he awoke, the man became more aware of his surroundings. Bits of panic and wonder competed for attention as he realized that he was alive.

He was floating on his back in warm, cloudy nothingness. Light filtered to him dimly from all directions at once. He was conscious of diluted pain, but something kept him from becoming interested. Within him he felt hunger and satiation, maintained in exact balance.

He moved slightly, stretched out an arm with great effort. His fingertips met, defining an invisible curved barrier less than an arm's length away. He dropped his arm and marvelled at the slowness of its fall. Clenching his fist, he felt viscous liquid squeeze between his fingers.

A large wave of panic swept through him when he realized that the cloudy nothingness was liquid and that it totally surrounded him. But it passed as he felt no need for air.

Where was he?

The realization came that he was in a transparent tank,

floating and suspended within it. Pressing down with his hands, he discovered that the liquid below him was actually a denser second layer.

He began to explore himself with his hands. He was naked, but for a round metal plate attached to his abdomen. Fingering it, he found a curved column of something at its center.

With great effort, he raised his head until he could see the plate. It was dull gray and fine tubing and colored wires led away from it to be obscured in the cloudiness that hid his feet.

He let his head fall back. The effort had tired him and he felt himself drifting toward sleep. But before his eyes closed, he had the distinct impression that there were two faces looking at him . . .

Something touched his forehead and he awoke for a third time. He opened his eyes and saw a metal rod in front of his face. It was something new, but its presence frightened him for only a moment.

It was sliding past his face in the direction of his abdomen. A moment later, the plate was jarred slightly as the rod bumped it and slid into an aperture. Vibrations of a barely detectable sort spread out from the plate into the man's body.

Joy! The man smiled, was happy, even felt like laughing.

Fear! He frowned, afraid; adrenalin raced through his blood.

Anger! His eyes narrowed and he hated.

Excitement! He quivered, his muscles tensed and he longed to move.

Pain!

His mouth opened in an attempt to gasp, then he went limp.

Life! The man smiled, frowned, narrowed his eyes,

quivered, grimaced, opened his mouth, and went limp again.

The rod was withdrawn. He saw the faces again before he dropped away into sleep. Now there were three . . .

Many periods of waking and sleeping passed. He began to take notice of other details in his environment. He was breathing. He could feel the liquid moving around him and through him in slow circulation. He could hear a light thrumming: the sound of pumps. He could move most of his body, but weakness and the drag of the fluid restricted him.

Now there were four faces . . .

They appeared and disappeared variously on a field of green, probably that of a hospital room. He noticed that they were distinguishable. One was round, with no hair on its head. Another: thin and dark, skin glistening black. The third was bearded and seemed to have no expression.

The fourth was unlike the others; it had long yellow hair and a white cap . . .

Pain woke him. His abdominal muscles were jerking and rippling under the plate. He tried to reach for it, but his arms were held by a strong band. There were similar bands around his shoulders, thighs and calves.

His head was free; he looked down. The plate was no longer flat against him. Instead, three inches of space separated it from his skin. In that space he could see hundreds of hairlike needles.

The pain continued. With each jump of his muscles, the plate worked itself further away. To his alarm, he saw that there were small curls of blood around each needle. Then the plate moved away completely and was withdrawn toward his feet. The pain died away.

Two curved metal bars slid by his face from a point beyond his head. The hooked ends were fitted to his armpits and he found himself moving horizontally.

Something soft touched the top of his head. The pressure made the substance give way and he began to slide into a mass of jelly-like material. It covered his head, conformed to his neck, admitted his shoulders. He couldn't see.

He felt an urgent need for air; he opened his mouth and tried to breathe. The soft substance that was sliding over his face absorbed and sucked out the fluid from his air passages. When it was completely withdrawn, he still could not breathe. There was a moment of panic.

His head broke suddenly into open air; he breathed. He shut his eyes tight; there was nothing he could do to stop the beating of his heart as gravity pinned him helpless.

Mercifully, he fainted.

He awoke to find his nose pinched and an oxygen tube inserted in his mouth. He lay on a surface that felt like a stone slab after the liquid in the chamber. His ears were covered; a low electronic hiss formed a background. His body was swathed in soft fabric that was soaking up the liquid; his eyes were covered by dark blue filters that made the light tolerable.

He moved his head and saw around him the familiar equipment of a hospital room: box of tissues, pitcher and water cup, metal furniture; each registered in turn. Sharp clean smells assailed his nose.

He heard a sound and he saw suddenly the fourth face. No longer distorted by liquid, it was wrinkled and acne-scared. The long hair was yellow, but stiff and uncombed.

He closed his eyes.

"Don't try to move," a tiny voice told him.

He opened his eyes and realized that it was the woman who spoke. The low volume did nothing to soften her voice.

He tried to answer, but a burning in his throat cut the effort short.

"Don't try to speak," the voice said. "Your vocal cords aren't ready yet."

The nurse busied herself over him for a moment, checking the fabric and gently shifting his body position. Then she hung a bottle from a fixture on the wall and unrolled its length of tubing.

The man turned his head away from her when he realized what she was doing. He felt the fabric on his right arm being pulled back and a cool liquid being swabbed on his skin. Then came the dull steady sting of a needle.

He heard the door shut and looked around. She was gone. The man sighed and succumbed to exhaustion, falling asleep in seconds.

He dreamed . . .

A wheeling, multicolored spiral winked into existence far away, against a background of total black. It rotated slowly, growing larger, then suddenly vanished.

He saw a looping curve to his left. He turned easily. A sparkling flow of colors rushed by. He was mildly surprised to find himself in the center of the spiral. Its coils twisted away, diminishing to a single point.

The motion within the spiral was slowing and he could pick out the individual colors in that portion nearest to him. They were images—smells, sounds, tastes, emotions, impressions, facts, events—all moments of existence.

Brown: he glimpsed a house and saw it again, many times.

Red: he smelled roses but saw none.

Green: he saw a woman: short, slim, brown hair, freckle-pretty.

Blue—green—red: he felt love, hate, anger, remorse.

Yellow: he felt a blow to his face and tasted blood.

He saw children, two girls and a boy. He heard laugh-

ter that faded to be replaced by sobbing. He saw the woman again, her face a mask of hate. He tasted alcohol and felt pity.

The woman and the children vanished. He heard, saw, felt, remembered, he knew a name—

Britton.

He saw a sleek car, an automatic highway. He felt sleepy, felt a cold wheel in his hands. He was sliding into something massive, into shock and explosion—

The spiral suddenly whipped away above him, became a point and was gone. He was left helpless in total blackness.

He woke up, arms stretched above him, reaching toward the ceiling. He felt hands on his wrists and saw that the nurse was struggling to lower his arms. He was shaking and sweating, his heart pounding.

“Wake up!” she pleaded. “Wake up, please! You’re not supposed to move!”

The man calmed. The nurse checked the needle and mopped his forehead with a damp cloth. She massaged his shoulders, whispering soothing kindnesses.

He closed his eyes and heard the door open. When he opened his eyes, three men stood beside his bed, peering at him quietly. They wore almost identical expressions.

“Hello,” said the beard. “I’m Doctor Fowler. I’m your physician. These are my assistants.”

At Fowler’s gesture, the round, bald one said, “Dr. Terry.” The thin one with black skin said, “I’m Dr. Collins.”

The man nodded to each of them. He found it to be very tiring.

“You were thrashing about,” said Fowler. “You were remembering, weren’t you?”

The man nodded again, surprised.

“Open your mouth, please,” said Fowler, leaning over

him. He took away the oxygen tube and shone a small flashlight down his throat. He replaced the tube after a moment and stood back again.

"The inflammation is receding. Can you speak?"

The man struggled to say something, anything, but the burning prevented him. He shook his head.

"Nurse, give me the vibrator."

Fowler pressed a hard and cool instrument against the side of the man's windpipe. "This will help you to speak. Do you understand?"

A nod.

"Before we begin, there are a few things I must know. A nod or shake of the head will do. Is your memory clear back to the time you awoke in the chamber?"

Nod.

"What about your past life, before you came here?"

Shake.

"But you have recalled something. Do you remember the accident?"

Nod and shake.

"Yes and no. Well, that's a start. Now I have to tell you that you were in a terrible accident. No identification survived the crash and the car was a total loss. It burned. There are . . . special circumstances here that have prevented us from identifying you. Do you remember your name?"

Nod.

"Good. I'll start this now. It'll be uncomfortable for a moment or so, but you should be able to speak."

There was a click and the instrument vibrated with a buzzing hum. The burning came back, but was much less intense than before.

"What is your name?"

Even with the vibrator, the man found it difficult to form syllables. "Bmm, Bri—ut, Brit—ton."

Fowler smiled and his colleagues mumbled their ap-

proval. "Britton. Do you recall your first name Mr. Britton?"

Britton pursed his lips and wrinkled his brow in an effort to recall. The dream, the spiral. Somewhere in it must have been a hint. He hadn't seen it, but it was there.

Collins whispered, "Is he in pain?"

"No, I'm sure he's trying to remember," Fowler replied. "Let him go."

Britton's face relaxed suddenly and he looked at Fowler. "Troy."

"Troy Britton." Fowler shut off the vibrator and took it away. "I think that will be enough for now. You're doing marvelously. Don't worry that you remember so little. The shock amnesia will pass in a while and it will all come back."

Britton—*Britton!*—smiled at the doctor in return.

The nurse came over to take Britton's pulse and temperature as Fowler stepped away to speak to the others. Britton listened carefully as he spoke.

"Dr. Terry, notify Records that our John Doe now has a name. They'll contact the authorities. Dr. Collins, have X-ray conduct a scan on the prosthetic nerves during his next sleep period. Nurse, prepare a soporific, please."

Fowler and Terry were beside him again. "You'll be remembering more in time, Mr. Britton," Fowler said, accepting a hyposprayer from the nurse and holding it up to check the settings. "It'll all come back, with patience. This will help you rest."

Britton heard a hiss and, after a moment, felt warm. He heard a roaring in his ears that sounded like the sea.

He slept.

He was stepping cautiously down a steep incline, his bare feet slipping on a carpet of black grass. Only the large white stones imbedded beneath the grass kept him from falling. He couldn't find the sun in the cloudless,

gray sky, but he could feel its heat on his face and hands. Sweat ran in rivulets under his uniform, dark patches of it spreading on the green cloth at his chest and armpits.

He cursed under his breath and stopped to look around. The incline fell away at his feet; its slope went on to meet the sky in the distance. Here and there a large white boulder bulged out of the grass to break up the expanse of black. No wind could be felt but the grass waved and bent before some invisible flow. Except for his own breathing, Britton could hear no sounds: he was alone.

He started forward again, making his way toward one of the boulders. The white stones hurt his feet. He sat down on the boulder and massaged them. He saw a pointed object on the ground near his feet and he picked it up; it was a folded paper airplane with his name written all over it. Unfolding it, he found that it was made from a blank sheet of blueprint paper.

Other objects lay around the edges of the boulder: a plain gold wedding band, a torn faded pennant with the letters OU; a half-eaten candy bar and a ruined toy car lay side by side in the black grass. He found a crumpled envelope that bore his name and another: Rose Ann Giacotti.

He picked up each of the objects knowing that they were clues to scattered portions of his memory. Graduated University of Ohio? Oklahoma? Aeronautical Engineer? Married . . . who? Rose Ann?

He sniffed the envelope: roses; children; the accident.

The boulder shifted suddenly under him, almost toppling him to the slope. He dropped the objects and flung himself to cling to the boulder. It rocked and bounced in its depression as Britton felt his hands slipping.

A sudden wind blew past him, tugging at his uniform. One by one, the seams in the material gave way. A sleeve blew free, then a trouser leg. As his clothing stripped away the wind cooled his naked, sweating skin.

The sky turned to silver, mirroring the landscape. He saw the black grass, saw himself astride the shifting boulder—and realized that he did not recognize the man reflected there!

His fingernails scraped over the smooth stone. In another moment, he lost his hold and fell, landing on his back . . .

He lay on a padded wicker couch, a towel draped casually across his naked waist. He was smoking a cigarette and watching small ripples in a swimming pool. It was night and underwater lights in the pool provided the only illumination. A warm breeze blew past him, stirring the leaves of massive trees to either side of the pool. Beyond, the hulking shadow of a large house loomed among more trees. There was no moon, only stars.

He took one last puff from the cigarette, flicked it away, stood up. He caught the towel as it fell and dropped it on the couch. Stepping to the edge of the pool, he poised himself in a graceful divers' pose, laughed at himself, then sat down on the edge and eased himself into the water.

He paddled with easy strokes to the center of the pool then began to swim. As he neared the deeper end of the pool he heard a crash. He righted himself in the water and listened.

From among the trees came a second crash followed by a man's curses: "Damned flower pots. All over the damned place!"

"Who's there?" he called out, treading water and craning his neck. "Benson, is that you?"

A dark, heavy man stumbled into the light to stand by the side of the pool. He weaved drunkenly, an automatic pistol in his left hand. He laughed.

"No, it ain't Benson. It's his night off, remember? I remembered."

"What do you want, Mayfield?" The man in the pool

tried to sound calm, but fear gave his voice a high pitch.

"I just came by to see my former partner," said Mayfield, waving the gun in the air. "Just came down to watch you skinny dipping, Tony." The gun came up fast. "Stay away from that ladder! I want you just where you are." Mayfield cocked the hammer of the automatic. "You'd better stay just where you are."

Tony turned in the water and struggled to reach the side ladder. A deafening crack came from behind him and the water exploded beside him. The bullet's shock wave in the water stung his side. A flash of flame leaped at him and smashed painfully into his shoulder. He lost interest in everything but the approaching darkness . . .

He awoke with a start. He lay in bed; Fowler was looking at him.

Britton nodded, but his vocal cords still resisted him. He moved his lips frantically.

To the nurse, Fowler said, "Bring the vibrator." He pressed the instrument to Britton's neck and said, "Go easy. Keep it short."

The vibrator buzzed and Britton had a voice. "I dreamed of my past life. My name is Tony. I was shot."

Fowler's eyes widened. He took the vibrator away as Terry and Collins came in and joined him.

"What is it?" asked Collins.

"He recalls a few more things now," Fowler said slowly. He says his name isn't Troy. It's Tony. And there was no accident. He was shot."

"But I was there when they brought him in," said Terry. "He was—"

Fowler waved him to silence.

Britton grabbed Fowler's arm. The filters and the headset were still in place, but he realized that his body was no longer wrapped in cloth.

Fowler gently removed Britton's hand and replaced the vibrator. "All right, Mr. Britton. Calm yourself."

"True! No accident. The cloth!"

"Cloth?" Fowler asked, puzzled, then realized what he meant. "Oh, we took that off for the X-rays. It wasn't required any longer."

"That was in the dream! My clothes were blown off."

"I see. Events here colored your dream. I wouldn't take what you saw as gospel, then. We were influencing you. From now on, we'll leave you alone while you're asleep. Okay?"

Britton felt doubtful but he nodded. Fowler started to remove the vibrator but Britton grabbed his arm.

"Bring me a mirror!"

Fowler sighed, then nodded at the nurse. "I had hoped to delay this Mr. Britton. You were in a terrible accident—it almost destroyed your body. You were brought here barely alive; almost nothing was salvageable. Your brain and a few important nerve groups were still intact, though." He sat down in a chair beside the bed. "Transplants as such were out of the question. We were forced to move along a higher plane."

As Fowler cleared his throat, "We went ahead of anything else we've done here so far, Mr. Britton. We made you an entirely new body out of parts."

Britton's mind raced, the impact of Fowler's words crashing into him like the bullets of the dream. He consciously tried to become aware of his whole body. He felt for missing sensations, for anything that did not seem normal. But he could sense nothing wrong.

He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself, then opened them and nodded. Fowler raised the mirror.

He was young, not middle-aged. Where he remembered red hair, black curls abounded. His eyes were brown rather than hazel, and he was almost handsome where he remembered jowls and a rather ordinary face. His skin was a swarthy olive, not freckled and fair-skinned.

He stared for a long moment at the stranger. Fowler said, "You're not the same man you once knew."

In a low voice, Dr. Terry asked, "Are you revolted? Do you hate us . . . for tampering?"

Britton shook his head. He reached out and gripped Fowler's hand.

"I think you'd better sleep," said Fowler. The nurse appeared with a hyposprayer. In less than a minute, Britton was asleep again.

The dreams came.

"Are you comfortable, Miss Farr?" The stewardess stood in the aisle, smiling sweetly.

"Yes, I am," said the actress, brushing the famous lock of auburn hair from her eyes. She was really a bit airsick, but the last person she'd tell would be another woman.

"If there's anything you require, just ring." The stewardess swung away, disappearing down the aisle of the jetliner.

"Bitch!" Delores whispered, making a face. To the man beside her, she added, "She doesn't give a damn about how I feel. If she knew Delores Farr was about to upchuck she'd probably do handstands out on the wing!"

A sudden lurch of the plane almost spilled her from the seat. The subdued whine of the engines grew louder.

"What was that?" she asked, sitting up and grabbing her agent's arm.

The stewardess moved quickly down the aisle, her face ashen. "Please fasten your seat belt, sir! Madam, fasten your seat belt!"

Delores waved at the stewardess. "What's happening? What's wrong?"

The stewardess stopped beside her. "Please fasten your seat belt, Miss Farr. We've run into some turbulence. There's nothing to be alarmed about."

But she leaned down to help with the belt, the plane lurched again and the lights went out. The stewardess

toppled against Delores. The engine sound was now a roar that cut out intermittently.

"We're going to crash!" Delores screamed. She pushed the stewardess away and tried to stand. Another lurch of the plane sent her sprawling in the aisle, held down by an increasing acceleration. Before she could scream again, the world turned into white flame. She saw the bulkhead an instant before she hit it . . .

Britton tossed fitfully as the dream changed . . .

"Jim! We gotta get outa here!" Someone tugged at his shoulder and shouted in his ear. "The fifth floor is going! This one's sure to be next!"

The fireman broke away from his partner and moved on through the flames and smoke. "That kid's still up here, I tell you! I heard her crying!"

"Well, I'm not staying! This whole place is gonna cave in!"

The man ran back down the smoke-filled hallway, leaving him alone. "Where are you, kid?" the fireman called, coughing on the thick smoke. "Keep calling! I hear you!"

Then he heard. "Here! I'm here! Help me!"

The child's voice made him run faster. Something crashed through the ceiling above him. He jumped to the side to avoid it but the falling timber struck him on the hip. He bounced off the wall and fell and then the entire ceiling came down, smashing him to the floor . . .

"Chuckie! I know you're in here!"

Chuckie could barely keep from giggling as the babysitter again passed by his hiding place. The dark cabinet under the sink was the best place he'd found yet.

He heard her go back into the living room. "If you come out *right now*, I promise you won't have to go to bed. Okay?"

Chuckie pushed the cabinet door open a bit to watch for her. Something jiggled under his arm. In the light from the crack, he saw that it was an open cola bottle. But it was half full.

He closed the door again and picked up the bottle. He sniffed it but his cold wouldn't let him smell it. Well, he'd just stay there, drink his soda pop and let her look for him all night. He didn't care.

Chuckie took a drink, a big drink. It tasted funny. In fact, it burned just a little. He took another—and his stomach erupted in pain.

He tumbled out onto the kitchen floor and began to cry. The babysitter rushed in and grabbed him up.

"Chuckie! Did you drink this? Tell me!"

He glimpsed the bottle before his eyes and nodded, crying even harder.

The babysitter was crying, too, but her voice was fading away. Chuckie went to sleep . . .

. . . and Britton woke. His stomach hurt, though the pain was dying away. He was sweating and breathing fast.

He reached up and found the buzzer.

The nurse appeared almost immediately. "Fowler," he whispered, finding his voice. "Get Fowler!"

In minutes, Fowler and his two assistants were clustered around the bed. "The nurse said you can talk," Fowler said. "That's good progress."

"The dreams," he rasped. "The dreams are frightening. I'm other people in them. I was even a woman! What's happening?"

"Jennings!" said Collins. "That paper a year ago! You read it Fowler—the Jennings Syndrome—"

"Shut up!" Fowler said, glaring at him. "This is not the time to discuss theories."

A voice burbled at the edge of Britton's consciousness. "Herb, don't drive so fast! We'll get to the movie in

plenty of time. *Herb, watch out! That truck . . . !*" Britton heard the sound of rending metal and the breaking of glass.

"They're starting again!" he said, struggling to get up. "I hear them now when I'm awake!"

The doctors held him as he thrashed on his bed and Fowler called the nurse. Britton fought the sleep they were forcing on him, but lost.

The dreams that came now swirled over his sleeping mind. He struggled, mustering his will to keep them formless, but they pushed their way in, overpowered him.

He saw hurtling autos and sinking ships. Water rushed around the edges of the world. Electric shock jolted him and he coughed in an unbreathable atmosphere. Someone grabbed him from behind, slicing his throat with a knife. He felt himself falling and a street loomed before his eyes.

He was many people in many places where many things happened. Information, memories and voices flew at him and by him so fast that he could separate the individual pieces and events.

He tried to stir as a portion of his shattered consciousness returned to the hospital room for brief moments. He heard familiar voices, he could not be sure that they were not from the dreams. . . .

"Are you ready to admit failure now?"

"I'm afraid so. Jennings was right, damn his soul!"

"What happened? We were so sure it would work."

"Jennings postulated that memory and intelligence are involved with the whole body. A hand would remember, or a heart, or anything alive."

"So many parts, all from different people. We thought we saved him."

"It wouldn't be so bad, but the memories he's retriev-

ing are all trauma-oriented, probably all of death. And they all died violently."

"Is there no hope?"

"None at all."

Britton was swept away, drowning among the dreams and deaths of his body parts. But one last surge of the mind that had been him moved his body to action. He half-raised from the bed, reached toward a ceiling he could not see, and screamed.

"Who am I?"

The doctors attended him for several minutes, then shook their heads and left. The nurse lingered a moment. Then she, too, went out, turning off the light and closing the door.

Haters of fantasy (as opposed to science fiction) be warned: what follows is fantasy absolutely. It controverts all postulations of science and thumbs its nose at the supposedly inviolable Laws of Nature. But perhaps there should be more nose thumbing in Nature's direction . . . after all, what is a man but the old girl's disreputable gesture towards the rest of the universe?

GORF! GORF! GORF!

William F. Nolan

There's a special office at the Pentagon called the Office of Stateside Emergencies. Dave Merkle is in charge, a thin, night-eyed man, haunted by a perpetual sense of failure. He was depressed on the morning of June 3, 1975 because there had not been a decent state-side emergency since early May. There had been three superb overseas emergencies, but they were handled by another office down the hall and didn't count.

The morning of June 3 was when Dave Merkle's right hand man, troubleshooter Eldon Sash, came in smiling. "We got one," he said.

Merkle raised his head from the desk to peer at Sash, who was fat and jolly. "Emergency?"

"You bet," said Sash in a piping voice. Fat men often have them.

"Stateside?"

"Right in upper New York."

Merkle looked dubious. He rose slowly from his chair. "I just hope this is a spot-on, one hundred percent goddam emergency."

"It's a frog."

"A frog in upper New York State is no emergency." He sat down again.

"This one is," Sash persisted. "It's big."

"How big?"

"I'd say about the size of your average four-unit apartment house."

"That's big all right," said Dave Merkle, thoughtfully tapping his chin. He began to look pleased.

"And it eats people. It already ate a guy in a sports car."

"What make?"

Sash carefully removed a small green notebook from his coat, checked a page. "Corvette."

Merkle smacked his palms together. "I *like* it, Eldon, I like it!" He strapped on a custom-grip .38 service revolver which was officially licensed and registered. "Where's the frog now?"

"After it ate the Corvette it hopped off toward Sleepy Hollow."

"Fine. I'll have a chopper pick us up on the roof and we'll hustle right out there." He gripped Sash at the elbow.

"Sir?"

"We need a project name for this thing. Any suggestions?"

"How about Gorf? Project Gorf."

"I don't get it." Merkle looked disturbed.

"That's frog spelled backwards," Sash told him.

"Gorf! Gorf! Gorf! It's a buy, Eldon! I'll have Miss Hennessey make up a folder."

"Meet you on the roof," piped Sash.

On the way to Sleepy Hollow in the Washington cop-
ter Merkle wanted to know how the frog got so big.

"It gobbled up some experimental growth pellets," Sash explained.

"Ours? Or *Theirs*?" Merkle frowned.

"Neither," Sash replied. "So far as I know, our govern-
ment is not working on any such pellet. Nor is Red

China. These particular growth pellets come from the lab of a cranky old eccentric. As I get it, he was developing the pellets for use on ducks. Planned to raise giant ducks for personal profit, claiming that future generations could live on expanded duckmeat. The pellets were designed solely for ducks, but the frog got 'em."

"How?"

"A crate of the duck pellets fell out of his pickup truck as he was crossing a bog, and he didn't miss 'em until he got home. By then it was too late. This frog ate the whole crateful."

"I see," said Merkle, tapping his chin. "Any more pellets left?"

"Not according to the old eccentric's pretty niece, a girl named Pinning. She told me her uncle just had this one crate. But he could make more."

"Nix on that." Merkle swept his hand out in a negative gesture. "Spiders could get 'em. Next thing, we have a giant three-story spider. Or a train-sized snake. No good."

"I told her to tell him to hold up on 'em until we could make an official decision."

"I'll get Miss Hennessey to issue a freeze form," declared Merkle. "Make it illegal for the old bastard to produce any more of the things."

The copter pilot announced that they were in the direct vicinity of Sleepy Hollow.

"I don't see any mammoth frog down there," Merkle snapped, shading his eyes. "What about that, Eldon?"

"It could be behind a small mountain digesting the sports car."

"Okay, then. We'll head for the old eccentric. He might have a lead on where the damned thing is."

The copter whipsawed west.

Linda Pinning led Merkle and Sash toward the laboratory of her uncle. She was a starkly-beautiful girl of

nineteen, with luminous skin and long dancer's legs. She wore a black leotard. "I'm a victim of schizoid conflict," she confided, as they moved down a long hallway. "My Uncle Downey thinks I possess remarkable talent, but I personally *loathe* toe-dancing."

"What do you prefer?" asked Merkle.

"Swamp life!" She sucked in a breath excitedly, and her breasts trembled. "That's why I live here with Uncle Downey. I've become an expert on swamp life. Garter snakes. Water bugs. And, of course, ducks."

"Of course," said Merkle.

They entered the lab. "My uncle is upstairs, but I thought you'd want to get a look in here first. You can see the success he's already had with pumpkins."

The lab was full of giant pumpkins.

"Must be ten times their natural size," commented Sash, absently patting his pumpkin stomach.

"Easily," agreed Merkle.

Linda explained why her uncle had switched to ducks. "He felt that pumpkins were too limited."

Sash grinned. "Sure can't roast a pumpkin!"

"We just want to know about the frog," Merkle said, scowling. "I suggest you fetch your uncle."

Linda complied, and moments later a dark hairy old man wearing a frayed black ankle-length raincoat tottered into the lab. His eyes bugged fiercely at them from incredibly thick-lensed glasses.

"Make it quick," he said. "Make it quick."

Merkle asked about the frog.

"None of my affair," grumped the old man. "Damn frog's none of my affair!"

"Ah, but it *is*," Merkle corrected him. "Your growth pellets caused it to expand into a public menace. It has already eaten a Corvette driver. We're here on emergency status."

"Don't care. Don't care a pig's snout for your status!"

He produced a rolled umbrella from inside the coat and waved it threateningly.

"My uncle's a Nauruan," Linda told them, by way of apology. "Naurans get cranky in their old age."

"I never heard of the place," said Merkle.

"Naura is an island nation of six thousand," Sash flatly intoned, "covering an area of eight square miles, located south of the equator and northeast of the Solomon Islands. You can look it up in the Cowles Encyclopedia of Nations."

The awkward impasse was broken by a loud trumpeting sound from the woods beyond the house.

"I think that's him, chief," said Sash.

"That is certainly the amplified croak of a *Rana catesbeiana*, or common bullfrog," Linda agreed.

Merkle whipped out his custom-grip revolver. "Let's pepper him!"

"Won't do any good," declared the cranky old man. "Bullets will just bounce off. Couldn't kill him with a cannon."

"What's he talking about?" demanded Merkle.

"Unfortunately, one of the present flaws in my Uncle Downey's growth-pellet research is the peculiar effect produced on the outer layers of any living creature. What you'll encounter is an armor-like exterior, impervious to bullets."

"That's crazy," sneered Eldon Sash. "How could people eat impervious ducks?"

"Exactly the problem my uncle is attempting to overcome," said Linda.

Merkle began to look desperate. "If an armored frog starts hopping toward New York my fat's in the fire! What kind of ground can it cover?"

The girl clucked her tongue. "At its present size, it can traverse up to fifty miles at a hop."

The old man stomped his foot. "All right, all right. I'll deal with it. I can deal with it. I've dealt with worse."

And he tottered briskly from the lab.

They crashed through the afternoon woods in the wake of the old man, attempting to keep up with his green battery car.

"How can he drive that thing in this kind of country?" asked Sash, out of breath and staggering.

"He's converted to off-road-vehicle components," panted the running girl. "Uncle Downey can go anywhere now."

"Hardly keep him in sight," gasped Dave Merkle, trotting beside Linda.

They entered a swampy area where huge, gaseous bubbles churned at ground surface. The green battery car, with its notched doughnut tires, was parked at the edge of the bog. Uncle Downey was not in it.

"Where is he?" demanded Merkle.

"Over here, over here," cried the impatient old man. "I have your fool frog."

They plowed toward his voice, careful to avoid swampy patches.

"Seems all but impossible," declared Sash. "A place like this, only a few frog jumps from the heart of Manhattan. Looks almost prehistoric."

"It is," said Linda. "This vast bog is where Uncle Downey does most of his duck research."

They rounded a bend in the swamp to face the apartment-sized frog, in front of which stood Linda's uncle with a small gold whistle.

"What's he going to do?" queried Sash.

Linda shook her head in bewilderment.

Merkle advanced with his revolver at the ready.

"Stay back!" rasped the old man. "He's fast with his tongue. Let me handle this. Back, back, back!"

They retreated a few steps, watching the big frog.

It was impressive. Its huge bulbous eyes blinked

vacantly and its distended throat pulsed like an immense heart. It was handsomely spotted.

"Be careful, Uncle Downey," warned Linda.

Her uncle ignored her, bringing the whistle to his lips. He blew soft tweeting sounds. The frog's eyes began to go sleepy.

"Oh, now I see," said Linda. "Uncle Downey is lulling it into a comatose state. His tiny golden whistle is obviously ultrasonic, and we are hearing only the low register."

"Great!" said Merkle. "He's *some* old gentleman!"

Uncle Downey swung grumpily around to face them. "Stop your blather! You'll ruin everything, ruin it all."

The frog suddenly shifted, snaked out a long tongue and snapped Uncle Downey off the ground and into its mouth. One swallow and the cranky eccentric was gone, whistle, raincoat, thick eyeglasses and all.

"Boy!" marveled Sash. "He was right. That is one *fast* tongue!"

"I could whack a few .38 slugs into its belly," Merkle suggested.

Linda sighed. "A pointless display of gunfire won't bring Uncle Downey back."

"She's right, chief," Sash agreed. "But what now?"

"We leave the big devil here for the present," said Dave Merkle, reluctantly holstering his custom-grip revolver. "If we're lucky he may just stay in this area looking for more growth pellets. Let's head back to Washington."

Linda picked up her late uncle's fallen umbrella and followed them toward the waiting battery car.

Five-star General Jordon Fielding Elliott rapped his maple map pointer smartly against his booted leg. "Then, as I understand it, what we basically have here is a giant hoptoad loose in the Catskills?"

Merkle nodded. "That's right, General Elliott."

"Call me General Fielding. I never use the Elliott except for paper work."

"Right," said Merkle.

"And the toad *is* dangerous?"

"Indeed," said Linda, "it *is*—having eaten, at the very least, a Corvette driver named Betts, and my Uncle Downey. But we must not mix toads with frogs. The creature we're dealing with in this case is a common bullfrog, though greatly enlarged."

"Thank you, Miss Pinning," said the general. "I'll make a note of that." He turned to a small, moustached assistant. "Lights, if you please."

The room darkened as the people in the small projection area settled into their chairs. In addition to Fielding and his aide, several high-ranking government officials were in attendance. "I love a good movie," one of them said.

A flickering, slightly off-focus 8-mm film filled one corner of the forward screen, showing dozens of frogs leaping and sunning themselves. Linda Pinning calmly provided the narration.

"As you will see in this simple nature film, taken by my late Uncle Downey at Sleepy Hollow, the bullfrog, or *Rana catesbeiana*, is the most carnivorous of the species. Its natural diet consists of earthworms, spiders and other insects, although it has been known to occasionally devour waterfowl and small chickens."

"Alarming!" a Congressman muttered in the darkness.

"The *Rana catesbeiana* croaks loudest of the frog family, and is particularly fond of cool, damp places. Thus, its swamp home in the Catskills is ideal and characteristic."

The film snapped to white—and Linda accepted a scatter of applause.

Cigars and pipes were lighted as Dave Merkle asked the general what he planned to do.

"Simple," Fielding smiled, adjusting a lopsided campaign ribbon. "We dispatch a whirleybird and some nets and we capture the big toad and—"

"Frog," said Linda.

"We capture the damn thing is all! Stick it in a zoo. Simple. That's how things work at my end of the hall."

Nods all around.

The plan sounded fine.

They tried netting the frog.

They tried bombing the frog.

They tried cannons and tank guns and laser fire.

With negative results.

For one thing, the frog kept hopping in odd directions, and they couldn't keep up with it. The situation became vital when it flattened the President's summer home in San Clemente. (It had also eaten a considerable number of people, including two prominent screen personalities, and the public was roused.)

General Fielding arranged an emergency Pentagon session with full Congressional backing in order to make an important announcement.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we are faced with what can only be termed a mounting dilemma." He turned to Linda. "Miss Pinning, would you fill the boys in on the latest?"

"Of course," she said. "As you may have surmised from recent reports, the frog has now *doubled* in size since it was first noted in the Catskills. We do not know exactly why the cell structure, nervous system and body tissues of the *Rana catesbeiana* are receptive to erratic or uncontrolled growth, but—regretfully—my late Uncle Downey's experimental pellets could not have affected any other natural creature to this degree."

"Will the son of a bitch keep growing?" asked a Nebraska senator.

"I'm very much afraid so," Linda replied. "But the rate is uncertain."

A rumble of discontent swept the room.

Fielding rapped the lectern sharply with his maple map stick. "Gentlemen, we have no choice. I declare this project on Red Alert!"

"What does that mean?" asked Dave Merkle.

"It means I have White House authority to order the use of a hitherto top-secret weapon." He measured the crowd with hard eyes. "You might even call it America's *ultimate* weapon."

Excited murmuring.

Fielding turned back to the girl. "Miss Pinning, is there some way we could get the frog to swallow a fairly large quantity of metallic substances?"

Linda raised an eyebrow. "I think he already has. Along with his unfortunate victims he's swallowed rings, wrist watches, tie clips, fountain pens, belt buckles, eyeglasses, gold fillings, keys, coins, metal shoe laces . . ."

Fielding shook his head. "What about Corvettes? He likes those, doesn't he?"

"He's swallowed three of them over the past month," Eldon volunteered.

"Right! Then we feed him all the Corvettes he can eat. And when he's got a bellyful we go on green." He pointed to his moustached aide. "Round up a couple dozen Corvettes."

"New or used?"

"Forget the vintage," roared Fielding.

"He seems to like new ones," Sash put in. "They slide down easier."

"All right, nothing older than '70, but hurry. Get those cars to that frog, pronto!"

It was dubbed Operation Sky Pole for obvious reasons—it was a pole and it went into the sky. Based under the Texas prairie, it rose at the touch of a button, not unlike

a giant automobile radio antenna, to a height of three miles. Topping it were twin metal globes with high-voltage electricity dancing between them, designed to attract any metallic flying object within 2500 miles. The basic idea, as Fielding explained it, was that an enemy guided missile approaching the U.S. would be drawn into the pole's magnetic field and instantly disintegrated by awesomely powerful electronic forces.

"Our frog full of Corvettes will be sucked in and totally destroyed," declared Fielding from his underground command post near Waco.

The bunker was awash in dignitaries.

"Where's the creature now?" asked Merkle.

"Dozing on the flats a few miles from Salt Lake City. He ate every Corvette we offered him—and finished off with a Land Rover. Oh, he's *full* of metal all right! Once he's airborne we activate the pole and watch the fireworks. Be like shooting ducks in a barrel."

"It's fish," Linda corrected. "Fish in a barrel."

"Never mind that," Fielding snapped. "You'll see what I mean."

The general, wearing his full-dress uniform, walked to a wall of blinking red and green lights. He checked a radar screen. "Everything is 100 percent up to date here," he said proudly. "We'll be able to trick our spotted friend A-OK all the way from Salt Lake."

"How do you plan to get him to jump?" Eldon wanted to know. "Sometimes he just snoozes for days. And weighted down the way he is . . ."

"That's being taken care of," Fielding assured him. "Able Company will lob hand grenades at his stomach. He just *hates* that. He'll jump out of sheer annoyance."

They crowded closer to the radar screen.

"Ready, sir?" asked the moustached aide.

"Lob!" shouted Fielding.

The aide repeated the order to lob into a field telephone.

Fielding checked his wristwatch. "The big countdown begins, gentlemen! In ten seconds that treacherous demon frog will be just so many spotted atoms floating in the void."

A blip began moving on the screen.

"He's in the air, General Elliott!" the aide squealed.

"It's Fielding! I never use Elliott, you damn fool. Confound you, now I've lost the count!"

"... six, five, four," offered Dave Merkle.

"Yes! . . . three, two, *one* . . . Watch this! . . . he's—"

A ground-quaking explosion. Dust and chunks of loosened concrete rained down.

All the red and green lights went out.

"What the hell's happened?" gasped the general, groping for his maple map stick on the floor of the darkened bunker.

"Apparently, sir, he struck the pole with one of his horny toes," reported the shaky voice of the moustached aide. "Our balls were dislodged—and the whole thing fell down on Waxahachie."

"This is going to look terrible on my record," moaned Fielding.

"Let's get out of here," said Dave Merkle.

Linda was gone when the smoke cleared at ground level.

Merkle looked concerned. "Do you think she's trapped below?"

"No, sir, she isn't," Fielding's aide stated. "I just observed Miss Pinning drive off in a field utility truck, headed due south."

"That's where the frog landed," declared Sash.

"She said something about coming to grips with her uncle's problem."

Merkle prodded Sash toward an empty jeep. "She's going to do something rash, Eldon, I'm certain of that.

Let's see if we can catch her." He knuckled his forehead. "You drive. I have an awful headache."

When Merkle and Sash caught up with Linda she was standing close to the mammoth frog, holding onto a small perforated cardboard box which she'd removed from her purse.

"Keep back," she told them. "He's stunned, but still quite dangerous."

The two men remained near the jeep, nervously eyeing the spotted giant. It squatted, dazed, on the desert floor, blinking stupidly.

Linda took off the lid and held the box aloft.

A wet, melancholy croak issued from the interior.

The huge frog ceased blinking. Its throat began a rapid pulsation.

It croaked deafeningly.

"I need a jet," Linda told Merkle, running toward him, the box in her hand. "Where can I borrow a jet?"

"There's one back at Waco Field," Merkle said, "but I don't think they'll let you use it."

She vaulted into the jeep. "Head for it! He'll be following us."

As Eldon Sash gunned away in a scattering of gravel, the frog attempted to leap after them, overshooting by several miles.

"My God!" breathed Sash. "What have you done to him?"

"Talking is superfluous. Just get us to that jet!"

At the airport, Linda convinced a bewildered Fielding that she was a qualified pilot. "Science and toe-dancing aren't my only talents!"

In the air, with Linda at the controls, Fielding demanded to know what the hell was going on. Merkle and Sash looked blank.

Also frightened.

Because the frog was still following them.

"Even with his substantial jump range we can keep

ahead of him," Linda said brightly. "Boys, this is the last lap. The checkered flag's in sight."

The small cardboard box rested on the seat beside her.

Near Sleepy Hollow the jet swept downward, skimmed the trees with a great slicing roar, and landed bumpily on a deserted stretch of New York highway.

"Everyone out!" Linda shouted. "He'll be here any minute, and we need to be properly positioned."

"For what?" demanded Fielding: "Positioned for what?" Sweat seeded his weak upper lip and his braided hat was on crooked.

Linda scampered across the highway into the woods, still clutching the box. The others trudged after her.

At the edge of the vast bog she paused, opened the lid, and a tiny green bullfrog flopped out.

"There!" said Linda triumphantly.

A trumpet croak in the sky.

Down came the immense spotted giant.

It landed, with a wet smack, in the exact center of the bog.

Within moments, the quicksand had sucked it under.

"Sex did the trick," said Linda.

"Explain yourself, Miss Pinning!" The general was still confused, and the front of his full-dress uniform was splashed with swamp mud.

"There is one call no creature can resist."

"And that is?" prompted Sash.

"The mating call," she said, giving Dave Merkle a knowing smile.

The tiny female frog from the box hopped over his left foot.

It croaked sweetly.

Life is basically an unfair thing for the living; the odds are always stacked in favor of the other side.

TIMESPRAWL

Anthon Warden

The large glowing 2 seemed to hang free in the sopping night air, antiseptic gray with the murk; there was little else in the weary city to break the gloom of the fog. A constant stream of people made their way toward the neo-classical building that seemed to shrink into itself beneath the overpowering number that promised the pilgrims a Second Chance.

Norman paused, conscious of the True City beneath his feet, feeling the beat of its distant heart. He felt the need for gathering shards of scattered courage, but as he stood there, he was constantly bumped and prodded by others as self-centered as himself, intent only on their own inner troubles. Twice he trod heavily on a toe, reminding with pain that pain was a constant: in the present that they all wanted to divorce, and in the past of their distant dreams . . . and even into the immediate tomorrow, no matter where they might run. There could be no escaping the evidences of pain.

For Timesprawl made no secret of the fact that pain was its constant companion and servant. The seekers were warned before the seeds of future seeking could be implanted, from the earliest moments of the creche, that retreat from the real world was not a prize to be given cheaply.

Still, for Norman and the others of his degenerate

emotion, the maybe-tomorrow could be so much more promising than the really-was that the price seemed payable; and the pilgrims came at all hours of the day and night, coming from the few still-viable areas of the shattered globe, searching for the key to their personal paradise after having known personal hell.

There were thirty-seven steps leading up to the massive main door of Timesprawl, and Norman tried to convince himself that there was personal significance in the numbering. It could not be denied that he was thirty-seven years of age; this very day was his birthday. It seemed only a slight implausibility that the architects of a century before his birth could have anticipated his coming.

Or maybe the significance lay in the thirty-seventh year: was it a particularly good year for making final decisions?

He decided not; thirty-seven for most would mean little but another mark on the passing calendar. The barrier years were the fortieth, when one senses impending failure, and the sixtieth, when it is too late for change. Glancing around at the shapes passing in the wispy fog, Norman would have wagered that the vast majority had reached one of those two explosive mileposts in life.

Timesprawl meant its visitors to be overwhelmed. The vaulted ceiling of the lobby seemed lost overhead, but it was only an effect. Walkways constantly carried busy people into a multiplicity of corridors, but life was constantly regenerated within the womb of the great room, impregnated by the constant orgasm of arriving pilgrims.

Norman approached a robot guard and received directions and a Seeing Eye that carried him into the depths of the building. The walkways were worse than the outside; people were crowded closer together, and he knew his nervous tic would reactivate itself if he could not break free. But at that moment they came to a lift bank over

which a constantly blinking sign said: *Recapitulation—Sublevel 37.*

Again the mystic and mystical number. The feeling of predestination drew strength.

He stepped into the sensuous grasp of the lift field and fell towards the bowels of the True City. The level indicator above proved superfluous, for the levels above thirty-seven were sealed off, and that goal proved to be the bottommost reach of the bank.

The dimensions of the room that opened before him were more manageable; he no longer felt lost in emptiness. Still, there could be no escaping the feeling that Timesprawl was a very large and very busy organization . . . and the conscience twinge that he should be ashamed of himself for taking up their important time. (But what other point to their existence, if not *his* need of *their* time?)

He approached a desk, spoke to a harridanish woman in severe uniform, presented his application, duly appended with prescription forms from the block psychotherapy computer. She scowled as she examined them, snarled when she looked into his face, exploded with uncontrollable anger.

“Fool!”

He flinched. “It is my right.”

“Aaagh!” She could say no more. She scribbled upon something, then pointed at a corridor. “In there. Room 37.”

Again and again and again . . . but that would be an admission of higher being and authority. Whatever Norman might be, he was firmly not religious. (He had never considered the thought that he might be antireligious.)

He accepted his ordering and found himself sitting in the familiar formless chair that was the stock in trade of the diagnostician. He waited an unreasonable length of

time, which he knew was an intended chastisement that would rarely work. Those coming this distance would be able to out-survive a simple unreasonableness such as waiting.

At last a tall-slender-young man came in, carrying a clipboard that bore an anonymous group of papers that might have been Norman's, or might have belonged to any citizen at all. It was even conceivable that they were blank, for he did not refer to them when he took a chair behind Norman. The familiar questioning began.

“Name?”

“Norman Aldwen.”

“Age?”

“Thirty-seven.” *Thirty-seven, thirty-seven, thirty-seven . . . the number was becoming vile curse.*

“Occupation?”

“Unemployable . . .”

They went down the long endless list, reconstructing the history of a person who had once been a man—a useful, productive citizen. There was little to excite in the recitation of endlessly repeated details. Yes, he related well to his creche siblings. No, he hadn't noticed any particular unkindnesses from his co-workers—for he had once been a worker. Yes, it was the incapability of continuing as a productive entity that had brought him to this final moment.

Yes, his pre-pubertal and post-pubertal sex life had been socially satisfying. No, he had never resented the fact that some sixty percent of his productivity went to support people to whom he felt no moral/social attachment/obligation. The eternal questioning continued down the probing list until at last even eternity must have a stop. There was only the one question left: the last question: the final question: he was not disappointed in its asking.

“What year would you like to retrieve?”

"Thirty-six." (Was that shocked silence? Was that untoward rustling of papers?)

"That's only one year." The tone was flatly calm, but Norman felt satisfaction at recognizing the wonder behind the wording. (And satisfaction? Was there satisfaction in proving meaning to others, even when there was no meaning to self?)

"There is only one year, always. There is only one point reachable where one must stop, one cannot continue."

"The reconstruction of a life takes more than a single year," said the questioner. "It is normal to ask for ten—twenty—"

"Then you may consider me an ungreedy person."

He was rewarded, as he knew he would be, with a full minute of unaccustomed silence. But in the end, there could only be one result: agreement. For the government had said that Recapitulation was the right of every needing citizen. (Ah, wondrous powerful government, whose power had increased multifold with the simple reduction of a Capital to a class description. For the government was the only class, and only class was the government.)

"One year," said the questioner one last time, hoping against hope for a capitulation before Recapitulation.

"To the day," said Norman, satisfied.

The world—the fraction of shattered continent that could still be said to be a world, in the old concept—revolved about a single theory: Categorization. To be categorized was to have a place, a purpose, a reward in self-sufficiency. To be categorized was to perform usefully to the benefit of all others, thus drawing their eternal (if begrudging) gratitude.

Norman had once been categorized. He had been educated in a certain minor and meaningless intricacy that nonetheless held its position in the scheme of all-

importance. He rose each morning, knowing that there was *need* for him, and heigh-ho, devil-take-ye-sluggards/dullards/dolts, there was *point* in the whole mindless unthinking schmear.

At this moment of placement along his timespan, Norman could no longer recall just what his category had been, even though it had been only a year before. He had done something; that was enough to deaden the mind, to accept the general state and status. Now, through the magic of science and the science of mysticism, he was about to return to the final moment of *true life*, to that point where category had been stolen from him swiftly, meanly, and permanently.

Still, he had not anticipated the !!! *PAIN!!!* of it all. Never mind the education, never mind the constant warnings, never mind I-told-you-so-smarty, this thing *hurt*. And in honesty to the processes of Nature, there is no reason why it should not. Any process which forces you psychokinetically (or psychochemically) (*or whatever*) to co-exist at all levels of your chronology is bound to be somewhat agonizing (in the sense that a woman about to bring forth child is somewhat pregnant).

The process lasted exactly thirty-seven eternities, during which the dying atomic clock on the wall ticked away the permanent passage of thirty-seven seconds.

Life abides. Somehow. The Recapitulation took, and Norman crawled out of his shattered cocoon of yesterday/tomorrow wrapped in the glow of absolute youth. Nothing showed on the surface: that wart was there when he entered the process, this ugly curve to jaw is no less deep. But he knew. He positively knew.

He was one exact year younger. (Oh, for the day when it would be possible to shatter time, destroy time, invent time. But not at this present. Recapitulation was not time travel.)

But was it time retravel? Who knew?

Smiling a knowing smile, Norman gathered his cloth-

ing and his credit cards and his identifying folder and all the other marks that proved to a machine world that here was a *man* (Pay attention, you dumb transistor/molecule/neuron!).

The man that was Norman Aldwen was thirty-six on his thirty-seventh birthday. He retreated his path through the maze that was Timesprawl, returning to the surface momentarily before deciding on a destination somewhere down below, in the True City. When decision was achieved, he sought and entered a public entrance and retraced a well-remembered pathway out of time. At last he stood before that place that once had been the meaning of life to him, the comforted satisfying yawn at night, the cold-floor stubby-cheek-rub in the morning, the *category!* of existence.

He paused, indulging in self-satisfaction a moment, then entered. There were faces here that had known him once and should recognize him still, but the purposeful of life owe no recognizance/recognize no owance to the decategorized. They stared blankly as he smiled and nodded in constant greeting, until he reached the destination that had been pre-ordained a full year (a full instant) before.

He brushed by the symbol of status and into the private office, and here the man could not ignore interruption. He looked up angrily. "Yes?"

"I remember *you!*" sang Norman, and he put out a hand and pushed. The man bounced in his chair, sputter/spluttering with intense emotion.

Norman turned around slowly, savoring the taste of the office, his eyes caressing the smell of the furniture, his nose drinking in the color of the carpeting and the drapes that hid no-window, only a wall. It was comforting to be in this room, for it was here that he had discovered the secret key to Ancient Happiness, the mystery of soul travel, the will to roam the stars.

He saw the painted-on bookcase against the far wall,

beside the door, and counted the books to thirty-seven, and suddenly there weren't any more. The number was reached; all was all; there was something/turned nothing. He had reached the ending, the final moment, the end of all.

Feeling a deep sorrow, he turned to the man in time to stop him from reaching for the button communication. He looked down on the man, hands resting around the little one's neck, and sighed.

"Why did you decide I didn't like you?" he said.

"Maniac!" Hands tightened and he sputtered. "Who are you?"

"I am the least of the least, and the mightiest of the mighty."

"What do you want?"

"Revenge." He shrugged. "What else?" And with that, he tightened his hands on the man's throat. Heels drummed against the carpet, puny hands grasped at strong ones, but no matter what, the saliva bubbled out—thirty-seven drops of it, in the final counting. If you had cared to finally count.

Norman had stopped counting. It was done and over, over and done.

There was purpose in life.

(Oh, government didn't recognize it as purpose, for it was not on their lists and charts. But he had done his thing; Timesprawl had served its purpose. He had returned in life to the point where the shock of decategorization had prevented him from taking violent and immediate action.)

But Norman cheated. Oh, not the machines, not the computortherapists, not the other oblivion seekers whom he might have momentarily displaced in Room Thirty-Seven. They didn't matter after all. No, the one Norman cheated was himself. His entire life had been a cheat, a fraud, a farce against the inability to face up to life in the twenty-second century.

Norman was born ahead of his time. He was born in 2099, and everyone knows that 2099 was a bad year for births, an unlucky year for births.

You see, there was no point in Norman's seeking revenge on the little man. The victim was not repaying an impossible debt. Norman had never been categorized at all.

Robert Silverberg is constantly fascinated with time: as concept, and as vehicle for eternity. Here he examines the whole meaning of what must be, in the last analysis, the last mystery . . .

IN ENTRCPY'S JAWS

Robert Silverberg

Static crackles from the hazy golden cloud of airborne loudspeakers drifting just below the ceiling of the space-liner cabin. A hiss: communications filters are opening. An impending announcement from the bridge, no doubt. Then the captain's bland, mechanical voice: "We are approaching the Panama Canal. All passengers into their bottles until the all-clear after insertion. When we come out the far side, we'll be traveling at eighty lights toward the Perseus relay booster. Thank you." In John Skein's cabin the warning globe begins to flash, dousing him with red, yellow, green light, going up and down the visible spectrum, giving him some infra- and ultra- too. Not everybody who books passage on this liner necessarily has human sensory equipment. The signal will not go out until Skein is safely in his bottle. Go on, it tells him. Get in. Get in. Panama Canal coming up.

Obediently he rises and moves across the narrow cabin toward the tapering dull-skinned steel container, two and a half meters high, that will protect him against the dimensional stresses of canal insertion. He is a tall, angular man with thin lips, a strong chin, glossy black hair that clings close to his high-vaulted skull. His skin is deeply tanned but his eyes are those of one who has been in winter for some time. This is the fiftieth year of his second go-round. He is traveling alone toward a world of the

Abbondanza system, perhaps the last leg on a journey that has occupied him for several years.

The passenger-bottle swings open on its gaudy rhodium-jacketed hinge when its sensors, picking up Skein's mass and thermal output, tell it that its protectee is within entry range. He gets in. It closes and seals, wrapping him in a seamless magnetic field. "Please be seated," the bottle tells him softly. "Place your arms through the stasis loops and your feet in the security platens. When you have done this the pressor fields will automatically be activated and you will be fully insulated against injury during the coming period of turbulence." Skein, who has had plenty of experience with faster-than-light travel, has anticipated the instructions and is already in stasis. The bottle closes. "Do you wish music?" it asks him. "A book? A vision spool? Conversation?"

"Nothing, thanks," Skein says, and waits.

He understands waiting very well by this time. Once he was an impatient man, but this is a thin season in his life, and it has been teaching him the arts of stoic acceptance. He will sit here with the Buddha's own complacency until the ship is through the canal. Silent, alone, self-sufficient. If only there will be no fugues this time. Or, at least—he is negotiating the terms of his torment with his demons—at least let there be no flashforwards. If he must break loose again from the matrix of time, he prefers to be cast only into his yesterdays, never into his tomorrows.

"We are almost into the canal now," the bottle tells him pleasantly.

"It's all right. You don't need to look after me. Just let me know when it's safe to come out."

He closes his eyes. Trying to envision the ship: a fragile glimmering purple needle squirting through clinging blackness, plunging toward the celestial vortex just ahead, the maelstrom of clashing forces, the soup of contravariant tensors. The Panama Canal, so-called. Through

which the liner will shortly rush, acquiring during its passage such a garland of borrowed power that it will rip itself free of the standard fourspace; it will emerge on the far side of the canal into a strange, tranquil pocket of the universe where the speed of light is the downside limiting velocity, and no one knows where the upper limit lies.

Alarms sound in the corridor, heavy, resonant: clang, clang, clang. The dislocation is beginning. Skein is braced. What does it look like out there? Folds of glowing black velvet, furry swatches of the disrupted continuum, wrapping themselves around the ship? Titanic lightnings hammering on the hull? Laughing centaurs flashing across the twisted heavens? Despondent masks, fixed in tragic grimaces, dangling between the blurred stars? Streaks of orange, green, crimson: sick rainbows, limp, askew? In we go. *Clang, clang, clang.* The next phase of the voyage now begins. He thinks of his destination, holding an image of it rigidly in mind. The picture is vivid, though this is a world he has visited only in spells of temporal fugue. Too often; he has been there again and again in these moments of disorientation in time. The colors are wrong on that world. Purple sand. Blue-leaved trees. Too much manganese? Too little copper? He will forgive it its colors if it will grant him his answers. And then. Skein feels the familiar ugly throbbing at the base of his neck, as if the tip of his spine is swelling like a balloon. He curses. He tries to resist. As he feared, not even the bottle can wholly protect him against these stresses. Outside the ship the universe is being wrenched apart; some of that slips in here and throws him into a private epilepsy of the time-line. Space-time is breaking up for him. He will go into fugue. He clings, fighting, knowing it is futile. The currents of time buffet him, knocking him a short distance into the future, then a reciprocal distance into the past, as if he is a bubble of insect-spittle glued loosely to

a dry reed. He cannot hold on much longer. Let it not be flashforward, he prays, wondering who it is to whom he prays. Let it not be flashforward. And he loses his grip. And shatters. And is swept in shards across time.

Of course, if x is before y then it remains eternally before y, and nothing in the passage of time can change this. But the peculiar position of the "now" can be easily expressed simply because our language has tenses. The future will be, the present is, and the past was; the light will be red, it is now yellow, and it was green. But do we, in these terms, really describe the "processional" character of time? We sometimes say that an event is future, then it is present, and finally it is past; and by this means we seem to dispense with tenses, yet we portray the passage of time. But this is really not the case; for all that we have done is to translate our tenses into the words "then" and "finally," and into the order in which we state our clauses. If we were to omit these words or their equivalents, and mix up the clauses, our sentences would no longer be meaningful. To say that the future, the present, and the past are in some sense is to dodge the problem of time by resorting to the tenseless language of logic and mathematics. In such an atemporal language it would be meaningful to say that Socrates is mortal because all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, even though Socrates has been dead many centuries. But if we cannot describe time either by a language containing tenses or by a tenseless language, how shall we symbolize it?

He feels the curious doubleness of self, the sense of having been here before, and knows it is flashback. Some comfort in that. He is a passenger in his own skull, looking out through the eyes of John Skein on an event that he has already experienced, and which he now is powerless to alter.

His office. All its gilded magnificence. A crystal dome at the summit of Kenyatta Tower. With the amplifiers on he can see as far as Serengeti in one direction, Mombasa in another. Count the fleas on an elephant in Tsavo Park. A wall of light on the east-southeast face of the dome, housing his data-access units. No one can stare at that wall more than thirty seconds without suffering intensely from a surfeit of information. Except Skein; he drains nourishment from it, hour after hour.

As he slides into the soul of that earlier Skein he takes a brief joy in the sight of his office, like Aeneas relishing a vision of unfallen Troy, like Adam looking back into Eden. How good it was. That broad sweet desk with its subtle components dedicated to his service. The gentle psychosensitive carpet, so useful and so beautiful. The undulating ribbon-sculpture gliding in and out of the dome's skin, undergoing molecular displacement each time and forever exhibiting the newest of its infinity of possible patterns. A rich man's office; he was unabashed in his pursuit of elegance. He had earned the right to luxury through the intelligent use of his innate skills. Returning now to that lost dome of wonders, he quickly seizes his moment of satisfaction, aware that shortly some souring scene of subtraction will be replayed for him, one of the stages in the darkening and withering of his life. But which one?

"Send in Coustakis," he hears himself say, and his words give him the answer. That one. He will again watch his own destruction. Surely there is no further need to subject him to this particular re-enactment. He has been through it at least seven times; he is losing count. An endless spiraling track of torment.

Coustakis is bald, blue-eyed, sharp-nosed, with the desperate look of a man who is near the end of his first go-round and is not yet sure that he will be granted a second. Skein guesses that he is about seventy. The man is unlikable: he dresses coarsely, moves in aggressive blurt-

ing little strides, and shows in every gesture and glance that he seethes with envy of the opulence with which Skein surrounds himself. Skein feels no need to like his clients, though. Only to respect. And Coustakis is brilliant; he commands respect.

Skein says, "My staff and I have studied your proposal in great detail. It's a cunning scheme."

"You'll help me?"

"There are risks for me," Skein points out. "Nissenson has a powerful ego. So do you. I could get hurt. The whole concept of synergy involves risk for the Coordinator. My fees are calculated accordingly."

"Nobody expects a Coordinator to be cheap," Coustakis mutters.

"I'm not. But I think you'll be able to afford me. The question is whether I can afford you."

"You're very cryptic, Mr. Skein. Like all oracles."

Skein smiles. "I'm not an oracle, I'm afraid. Merely a conduit through whom connections are made. I can't foresee the future."

"You can evaluate probabilities."

"Only concerning my own welfare. And I'm capable of arriving at an incorrect evaluation."

Coustakis fidgets. "Will you help me or won't you?"

"The fee," Skein says, "is half a million down, plus an equity position of fifteen percent in the corporation you'll establish with the contacts I provide."

Coustakis gnaws at his lower lip. "So much?"

"Bear in mind that I've got to split my fee with Nissenson. Consultants like him aren't cheap."

"Even so. Ten percent."

"Excuse me, Mr. Coustakis. I really thought we were past the point of negotiation in this transaction. It's going to be a busy day for me, and so—" Skein passes his hand over a black rectangle on his desk and a section of the floor silently opens, uncovering the dropshaft access. He nods toward it. The carpet reveals the colors of Coustakis.

takis' mental processes: black for anger, green for greed, red for anxiety, yellow for fear, blue for temptation, all mixed together in the hashed pattern betraying the calculations now going on in his mind. Coustakis will yield. Nevertheless Skein proceeds with the charade of standing, gesturing toward the exit, trying to usher his visitor out. "All right," Coustakis says explosively, "fifteen percent!"

Skein instructs his desk to extrude a contract cube. He says, "Place your hand here, please," and as Coustakis touches the cube he presses his own palm against its opposite face. At once the cube's sleek crystalline surface darkens and roughens as the double sensory output bombards it. Skein says, "Repeat after me. I, Nicholas Coustakis, whose handprint and vibration pattern are being imprinted in this contract as I speak—"

"I, Nicholas Coustakis, whose handprint and vibration pattern are being imprinted in this contract as I speak—"

"—do knowingly and willingly assign to John Skein Enterprises, as payment for professional services to be rendered, an equity interest in Coustakis Transport Ltd. or any successor corporation amounting to—"

"—do knowingly and willingly assign—"

They droned on in turns through a description of Coustakis' corporation and the irrevocable nature of Skein's part ownership in it. Then Skein files the contract cube and says, "If you'll phone your bank and put your thumb on the cash part of the transaction, I'll make contact with Nissenson and you can get started."

"Half a million?"

"Half a million."

"You know I don't have that kind of money."

"Let's not waste time, Mr. Coustakis. You have assets. Pledge them as collateral. Credit is easily obtained."

Scowling, Coustakis applies for the loan, gets it, transfers the funds to Skein's account. The process takes eight minutes; Skein uses the time to review Coustakis' ego-

profile. It displeases Skein to have to exert such sordid economic pressures; but the service he offers does, after all, expose him to dangers, and he must cushion the risk by high guarantees, in case some mishap should put him out of business.

"Now we can proceed," Skein says, when the transaction is done.

Coustakis has almost invented a system for the economical instantaneous transportation of matter. It will not, unfortunately, ever be useful for living things, since the process involves the destruction of the material being shipped and its virtually simultaneous reconstitution elsewhere. The fragile entity that is the soul cannot withstand the withering blast of Coustakis' transmitter's electron beam. But there is tremendous potential in the freight business; the Coustakis transmitter will be able to send cabbages to Mars, computers to Pluto, and, given the proper linkage facilities, it should be able to reach the inhabited extrasolar planets.

However, Coustakis has not yet perfected his system. For five years he has been stymied by one impassable problem: keeping the beam tight enough between transmitter and receiver. Beam-spread has led to chaos in his experiments; marginal straying results in the loss of transmitted information, so that that which is being sent invariably arrives incomplete. Coustakis has depleted his resources in the unsuccessful search for a solution, and thus has been forced to the desperate and costly step of calling in a Communicator.

For a price, Skein will place him in contact with someone who can solve his problem. Skein has a network of consultants on several worlds, experts in technology and finance and philology and nearly everything else. Using his own mind as the focal nexus, Skein will open telepathic communion between Coustakis and a consultant.

"Get Nissenson into a receptive state," he orders his desk.

Coustakis, blinking rapidly, obviously uneasy, says, "First let me get it clear. This man will see everything that's in my mind? He'll get access to my secrets?"

"No. No. I filter the communion with great care. Nothing will pass from your mind to his except the nature of the problem you want him to tackle. Nothing will come back from his mind to yours except the answer."

"And if he doesn't have the answer?"

"He will."

Skein gives no refunds in the event of failure, but he has never had a failure. He does not accept jobs that he feels will be inherently impossible to handle. Either Nissenson will see the solution Coustakis has been overlooking, or else he will make some suggestion that will nudge Coustakis toward finding the solution himself. The telepathic communion is the vital element. Mere talking would never get anywhere. Coustakis and Nissenson could stare at blueprints together for months, pound computers side by side for years, debate the difficulty with each other for decades, and still they might not hit on the answer. But the communion creates a synergy of minds that is more than a doubling of the available brain-power. A union of perceptions, a heightening, that always produces that mystic flash of insight, that leap of the intellect.

"And if he goes into the transmission business for himself afterward?" Coustakis asks.

"He's bonded," Skein says curtly. "No chance of it. Let's go, now. Up and together."

The desk reports that Nissenson, half the world away in Sao Paulo, is ready. Skein's power does not vary with distance. Quickly he throws Coustakis into the receptive condition, and swings around to face the brilliant lights of his data-access units. Those sparkling, shifting little blazes kindle his gift, jabbing at the electrical rhythms of his brain until he is lifted into the energy level that per-

mits the opening of a communion. As he starts to go up, the other Skein who is watching, the time-displaced prisoner behing his forehead, tries frenziedly to prevent him from entering the fatal linkage. *Don't. Don't. You'll overload. They're too strong for you.* Easier to halt a planet in its orbit, though. The course of the past is frozen; all this has already happened; the Skein who cries out in silent anguish is merely an observer, necessarily passive, here to view the maiming of his earlier self.

Skein reaches forth one tendril of his mind and engages Nissenson. With another tendril he snares Coustakis. Steadily, now, he draws the two tendrils together.

There is no way to predict the intensity of the forces that will shortly course through his brain. He has done what he could, checking the ego-profiles of his client and the consultant, but that really tells him little. What Coustakis and Nissenson may be as individuals hardly matters; it is what they may become in communion that he must fear. Synergic intensities are unpredictable. He has lived for a lifetime and a half with the possibility of a burnout.

The tendrils meet.

Skein the observer winces and tries to armor himself against the shock. But there is no way to deflect it. Out of Coustakis' mind flows a description of the matter-transmitter and a clear statement of the beam-spread problem; Skein shoves it along to Nissenson, who begins to work on a solution. But when their minds join it is immediately evident that their combined strength will be more than Skein can control. This time the synergy will destroy him. But he cannot disengage; he has no mental circuitbreaker. He is caught, trapped, impaled. The entity that is Coustakis Nissenson will not let go of him, for that would mean its own destruction. A wave of mental energy goes rippling and dancing along the vector of communion from Coustakis to Nissenson and goes bouncing back, pulsating and gaining strength, from Nissenson to Coustakis. A fiery oscillation is set up. Skein

sees what is happening; he has become the amplifier of his own doom. The torrent of energy continues to gather power each time it reverberates from Coustakis to Nissenson, from Nissenson to Coustakis. Powerless, Skein watches the energy-pumping effect building up a mighty charge. The discharge is bound to come soon, and he will be the one who must receive it. How long? How long? The juggernaut fills the corridors of his mind. He ceases to know which end of the circuit is Nissenson, which is Coustakis; he perceives only two shining walls of mental power, between which he is stretched ever thinner, a twanging wire of ego, heating up, heating up, glowing now, emitting a searing blast of heat, particles of identity streaming away from him like so many liberated ions—

Then he lies numb and dazed on the floor of his office, grinding his face into the psychosensitive carpet, while Coustakis barks over and over, "Skein? Skein? Skein? Skein?"

Like any other chronometric device, our inner clocks are subject to their own peculiar disorders and, in spite of the substantial concordance between private and public time, discrepancies may occur as the result of sheer inattention. Mach noted that if a doctor focuses his attention on the patient's blood, it may seem to him to squirt out before the lancet enters the skin and, for similar reasons, the feebler of two stimuli presented simultaneously is usually perceived later. . . . Normal life requires the capacity to recall experiences in a sequence corresponding, roughly at least, to the order in which they actually occurred. It requires in addition that our potential recollections should be reasonably accessible to consciousness. These potential recollections mean not only a perpetuation within us of representations of the past, but also a ceaseless interplay between such representations and the uninterrupted input of present information from the external world. Just as our past may be at the service

of our present, so the present may be remotely controlled by our past: in the words of Shelley, "Swift as a Thought by the snake Memory stung."

"Skein? Skein? Skein? Skein?"

His bottle is open and they are helping him out. His cabin is full of intruders. Skein recognizes the captain's robot, the medic, and a couple of passengers, the little swarthy man from Pingalore and the woman from Globe Fifteen. The cabin door is open and more people are coming in. The medic makes a cuff-shooting gesture and a blinding haze of metallic white particles wraps itself about Skein's head. The little tingling prickling sensations spur him to wakefulness. "You didn't respond when the bottle told you it was all right," the medic explains. "We're through the canal."

"Was it a good passage? Fine. Fine. I must have dozed."

"If you'd like to come to the infirmary—a routine check, only—put you through the diagnostat—"

"No. No. Will you all please go? I assure you, I'm quite all right."

Reluctantly, clucking over him, they finally leave. Skein gulps cold water until his head is clear. He plants himself flatfooted in midcabin, trying to pick up some sensation of forward motion. The ship now is traveling at something like fifteen million miles a second. How long is fifteen million miles? How long is a second? From Rome to Naples it was a morning's drive on the autostrada. From Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was the time between twilight and darkness. San Francisco to San Diego spanned lunch to dinner by superpod. As I slide my right foot two inches forward we traverse fifteen million miles. From where to where? And why? He has not seen Earth in twenty-six months. At the end of this voyage his remaining funds will be exhausted. Perhaps he will have to make his home in the Abbondanza system; he has no re-

turn ticket. But of course he can travel to his heart's discontent within his own skull, whipping from point to point along the time-line in the grip of the fugues.

He goes quickly from his cabin to the recreation lounge.

The ship is a second-class vessel, neither lavish nor seedy. It carries about twenty passengers, most of them, like him, bound outward on one-way journeys. He has not talked directly to any of them, but he has bone considerable eavesdropping in the lounge, and by now can tag each one of them with the proper dull biography. The wife bravely joining her pioneer husband, whom she has not seen for half a decade. The remittance man under orders to place ten thousand lightyears, at the very least, between himself and his parents. The glittery-eyed entrepreneur, a Phoenician merchant sixty centuries after his proper era, off to carve an empire as a middleman's middleman. The tourists. The bureaucrat. The colonel. Among this collection Skein stands out in sharp relief; he is the only one who has not made an effort to know and be known, and the mystery of his reserve tantalizes them.

He carries the fact of his crackup with him like some wrinkled dangling yellowed wen. When his eyes meet those of any of the others he says silently, *You see my deformity? I am my own survivor. I have been destroyed and lived to look back on it. Once I was a man of wealth and power, and look at me now. But I ask for no pity. Is that understood?*

Hunching at the bar, Skein pushes the node for filtered rum. His drink arrives, and with it comes the remittance man, handsome, young, insinuating. Giving Skein a confidential wink, as if to say, *I know. You're on the run too.*

“From Earth, are you?” he says to Skein.

“Formerly.”

“I’m Pid Rocklin.”

“John Skein.”

“What were you doing there?”

"On Earth?" Skein shrugs. "A Communicator. I retired four years ago."

"Oh." Rocklin summons a drink. "That's good work, if you have the gift."

"I had the gift," Skein says. The unstressed past tense is as far into self-pity as he will go. He drinks and pushes for another one. A great gleaming screen over the bar shows the look of space: empty, here beyond the Panama Canal, although yesterday a million suns blazed on that ebony rectangle. Skein imagines he can hear the whoosh of hydrogen molecules scraping past the hull at eighty lights. He sees them as blobs of brightness millions of miles long, going *zip!* and *zip!* and *zip!* as the ship spurts along. Abruptly a purple nimbus envelops him and he drops into a flashforward fugue so quickly there is not even time for the usual futile resistance. "Hey, what's the matter?" Pid Rocklin says, reaching for him. "Are you all—" and Skein loses the universe.

He is on the world that he takes to be Abbondanza VI, and his familiar companion, the skull-faced man, stands beside him at the edge of an oily orange sea. They appear to be having the debate about time once again. The skull-faced man must be at least 120 years old; his skin lies against his bones with, seemingly, no flesh at all under it, and his face is all nostrils and burning eyes. Bony sockets, sharp shelves for cheekbones, a bald dome of a skull. The neck no more than wrist-thick, rising out of shriveled shoulders. Saying, "Won't you ever come to see that causality is merely an illusion, Skein? The notion that there's a consecutive series of events is nothing but a fraud. We impose form on our lives, we talk of time's arrow, we say that there's a flow from A through G and Q to Z, we make believe everything is nicely linear. But it isn't, Skein. It isn't."

"So you keep telling me."

"I feel an obligation to awaken your mind to the truth.

G can come before A, and Z before both of them. Most of us don't like to perceive it that way, so we arrange things in what seems like a more logical pattern, just as a novelist will put the motive before the murder and the murder before the arrest. But the universe isn't a novel. We can't make nature imitate art. It's all random, Skein, random, random! Look there. You see what's drifting on the sea?"

On the orange waves tosses the bloated corpse of a shaggy blue beast. Upturned saucy eyes, drooping snout, thick limbs. Why is it not waterlogged by now? What keeps it afloat?

The skullfaced man says, "Time is an ocean, and events come drifting to us as randomly as dead animals on the waves. We filter them. We screen out what doesn't make sense and admit them to our consciousness in what seems to be the right sequence." He laughs. "The grand delusion! The past is nothing but a series of films slipping unpredictably into the future. And vice versa."

"I won't accept that," Skein says stubbornly. "It's a demonic, chaotic, nihilistic theory. It's idiocy. Are we graybeards before we're children? Do we die before we're born? Do trees devolve into seeds? Deny linearity all you like. I won't go along."

"You can say that after all you've experienced?"

Skein shakes his head. "I'll go on saying it. What I've been going through is a mental illness. Maybe I'm deranged, but the universe isn't."

"Contrary. You've only recently become sane and started to see things as they really are," the skullfaced man insists. "The trouble is that you don't want to admit the evidence you've begun to perceive. Your filters are down, Skein! You've shaken free of the illusion of linearity! Now's your chance to show your resilience. Learn to live with the real reality. Stop this silly business of imposing an artificial order on the flow of time. Why *should* effect follow cause? Why *shouldn't* the seed follow the

tree? Why must you persist in holding tight to a useless, outworn, contemptible system of false evaluations of experience when you've managed to break free of the—”

“Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!”

“—right, Skein?”

“What happened?”

“You started to fall off your stool,” Pid Rocklin says. “You turned absolutely white. I thought you were having some kind of a stroke.”

“How long was I unconscious?”

“Oh, three, four seconds, I suppose. I grabbed you and propped you up, and your eyes opened. Can I help you to your cabin? Or maybe you ought to go to the infirmary.”

“Excuse me,” Skein says hoarsely, and leaves the lounge.

When the hallucinations began, not long after the Coustakis overload, he assumed at first that they were memory disturbances produced by the fearful jolt he had absorbed. Quite clearly most of them invoked scenes of his past, which he would relive, during the moments of fugue, with an intensity so brilliant that he felt he had actually been thrust back into time. He did not merely recollect, but rather he experienced the past anew, following a script from which he could not deviate as he spoke and felt and reacted. Such strange excursions into memory could be easily enough explained: his brain had been damaged, and it was heaving old segments of experience into view in some kind of attempt to clear itself of debris and heal the wounds. But while the flashbacks were comprehensible, the flashforwards were not, and he did not recognize them at all for what they actually were. Those scenes of himself wandering alien worlds, those phantom conversations with people he had never met, those views of spaceliner cabins and transit booths

and unfamiliar hotels and passenger terminals, seemed merely to be fantasies, random fictions of his injured brain. Even when he started to notice that there was a consistent pattern to these feverish glimpses of the unknown, he still did not catch on. It appeared as though he was seeing himself performing a sort of quest, or perhaps a pilgrimage; the slices of unexperienced experience that he was permitted to see began to fit into a coherent structure of travel and seeking. And certain scenes and conversations recurred, yes, sometimes several times the same day, the script always the same, so that he began to learn a few of the scenes word for word. Despite the solid texture of these episodes, he persisted in thinking of them as mere brief flickering segments of nightmare. He could not imagine why the injury to his brain was causing him to have these waking dreams of long space-voyages and unknown planets, so vivid and so momentarily real, but they seemed no more frightening to him than the equally vivid flashbacks.

Only after a while, when many months had passed since the Coustakis incident, did the truth strike him. One day he found himself living through an episode that he considered to be one of his fantasies. It was a minor thing, one that he had experienced, in whole or in part, seven or eight times. What he had seen, in fitful bursts of uninvited delusion, was himself in a public garden on some hot spring morning, standing before an immense baroque building while a grotesque group of non-human tourists filed past him in a weird creaking, clanking procession of inhalator-suits and breather-wheels and ion-disperser masks. That was all. Then it happened that a harrowing legal snarl brought him to a city in North Carolina about fourteen months after the overload, and, after having put in his appearance at the courthouse, he set out on a long walk through the grimy, decayed metropolis, and came, as if by an enchantment, to a huge metal gate behind which he could see a dark sweep of

lavish forest, oaks and rhododendrons and magnolias, laid out in an elegant formal manner. It was, according to a sign posted by the gate, the estate of a nineteenth-century millionaire, now open to all and preserved in its ancient state despite the encroachments of the city on its borders. Skein bought a ticket and went in, on foot, hiking for what seemed like miles through cool leafy glades, until abruptly the path curved and he emerged into the bright sunlight and saw before him the great gray bulk of a colossal mansion, hundreds of rooms topped by parapets and spires, with a massive portico from which vast columns of stairs descended. In wonder he moved toward it, for this was the building of his frequent fantasy, and as he approached he beheld the red and green and purple figures crossing the portico, those coiled and gnarled and looping shapes he had seen before, the eerie horde of alien travelers here to take in the wonders of Earth. Heads without eyes, eyes without heads, multiplicities of limbs and absences of limbs, bodies like tumors and tumors like bodies, all the universe's imagination on display in these agglomerated life-forms, so strange and yet not at all strange to him. But this time it was no fantasy. It fit smoothly into the sequence of the events of the day, rather than dropping, dreamlike, intrusive, into that sequence. Nor did it fade after a few moments; the scene remained sharp, never leaving him to plunge back into "real" life. This was reality itself, and he had experienced it before.

Twice more in the next few weeks things like that happened to him, until at last he was ready to admit the truth to himself about his fugues, that he was experiencing flashforwards as well as flashbacks, that he was being subjected to glimpses of his own future.

T'ang, the high king of the Shang, asked Hsia Chi saying, "In the beginning, were there already individual things?" Hsia Chi replied, "If there were no things then

how could there be any now? If later generations should pretend that there had been no things in our time, would they be right?" T'ang said, "Have things then no before and no after?" To which Hsia Chi replied, "The ends and the origins of things have no limit from which they began. The origin of one thing may be considered the end of another; the end of one may be considered the origin of the next. Who can distinguish accurately between these cycles? What lies beyond all things, and before all events, we cannot know."

They reach and enter the Perseus relay booster, which is a whirling celestial anomaly structurally similar to the Panama Canal but not nearly so potent, and it kicks the ship's velocity to just above a hundred lights. That is the voyage's final acceleration; the ship will maintain this rate for two and a half days, until it clocks in at Scylla, the main deceleration station for this part of the galaxy, where it will be seized by a spongy web of forces twenty lightminutes in diameter and slowed to sublight velocities for the entry into the Abbondanza system.

Skein spends nearly all of this period in his cabin, rarely eating and sleeping very little. He reads almost constantly, obsessively dredging from the ship's extensive library a wide and capricious assortment of books. Rilke. Kafka. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*. Lowry, *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. Elias. Razhuminin. Dickey. Pound. Fraisse, *The Psychology of Time*. Greene, *Dream and Delusion*. Poe. Shakespeare. Marlowe. Tourneur. *The Waste Land*. *Ulysses*. *Heart of Darkness*. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*. Jung. Buchner. Pirandello. *The Magic Mountain*. Ellis, *The Rack*. Cervantes. Blenheim. Fierst. Keats. Nietzsche. His mind swims with images and bits of verse, with floating sequences of dialogue, with unscaffolded dialectics. He dips into each work briefly, magpie-like, seeking bright scraps. The words form a scaly impasto on the

inner surface of his skull. He finds that this heavy verbal overdose helps, to some slight extent, to fight off the fugues; his mind is weighted, perhaps, bound by this leaden clutter of borrowed genius to the moving line of the present, and during his debauch of reading he finds himself shifting off that line less frequently than in the recent past. His mind whirls. *Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman—a rope over an abyss.* My patience are exhausted. *See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament! One drop would save my soul.* I had not thought death had undone so many. These fragments I have shored against my ruins. *Hoog-spanning. Levensgevaar. Peligro de Muerte. Electricidad. Danger.* Give me my spear. *Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.* You like this garden? Why is it yours? We evict those who destroy! *And then went down to the ship, set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea.* There is no "official" theory of time, defined in creeds or universally agreed upon among Christians. Christianity is not concerned with the purely scientific aspects of the subject nor, within wide limits, with its philosophical analysis, except insofar as it is committed to a fundamentally realist view and could not admit, as some Eastern philosophies have done, that temporal existence is mere illusion. *A shudder in the loins engenders there the broken wall, the burning roof and tower and Agamemnon dead.* Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. *In what distant deeps or skies burnt the fire of thine eyes? On what wings dare he aspire? What the hand dare seize the fire?* These fragments I have shored against my ruins. Hieronymo's mad againe. *Then felt I like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken.* It has also lately been postulated that the physical concept of information is identical with a phenomenon of reversal of entropy. The psychologist must add a few remarks here:

It does not seem convincing to me that information is *eo ipso* identical with a *pouvoir d'organisation* which undoes entropy. *Datta. Dayadhwam. Dãmyata. Shantih shantih shantib.*

Nevertheless, once the ship is past Scylla and slowing toward the Abbondanza planets, the periods of fugue become frequent once again, so that he lives entrapped, shuttling between the flashing shadows of yesterday and tomorrow.

After the Coustakis overload he tried to go on in the old way, as best he could. He gave Coustakis a refund without even being asked, for he had been of no service, nor could he ever be, now. Instantaneous transportation of matter would have to wait. But Skein took other clients. He could still make the communion, after a fashion, and when the nature of the task was sufficiently low-level he could even deliver a decent synergetic response.

Often his work was unsatisfactory, however. Contacts would break at awkward moments, or, conversely, his filter-mechanism would weaken and he would allow the entire contents of his client's mind to flow into that of his consultant. The results of such disasters were chaotic, involving him in heavy medical expenses and sometimes in damage suits. He was forced to place his fees on a contingency basis: no synergy, no pay. About half the time he earned nothing for his output of energy. Meanwhile his overhead remained the same as always: the domed office, the network of consultants, the research staff, and the rest. His effort to remain in business was eating rapidly into the bank accounts he had set aside against just such a time of storm.

They could find no organic injury to his brain. Of course, so little was known about a Communicator's gift that it was impossible to determine much by medical analysis. If they could not locate the center from which a

Communicator powered his communions, how could they detect the place where he had been hurt? The medical archives were of no value; there had been eleven previous cases of overload, but each instance was physiologically unique. They told him he would eventually heal, and sent him away. Sometimes the doctors gave him silly therapies: counting exercises, rhythmic blinkings, hopping on his left leg and then his right, as if he had had a stroke. But he had not had a stroke.

For a time he was able to maintain his business on the momentum of his reputation. Then, as word got around that he had been hurt and was no longer any good, clients stopped coming. Even the contingency basis for fees failed to attract them. Within six months he found that he was lucky to find a client a week. He reduced his rates, and that seemed only to make things worse, so he raised them to something not far below what they had been at the time of the overload. For a while the pace of business increased, as if people were getting the impression that Skein had recovered. He gave such spotty service, though. Blurred and wavering communions, unanticipated positive feedbacks, filtering problems, information deficiencies, redundancy surpluses—"You take your mind in your hands when you go to Skein," they were saying now.

The fugues added to his professional difficulties.

He never knew when he would snap into hallucination. It might happen during a communion, and often did. Once he dropped back to the moment of the Coustakis-Nissenson hookup and treated a terrified client to a replay of his overload. Once, although he did not understand at the time what was happening, he underwent a flashforward and carried the client with him to a scarlet jungle on a formaldehyde world, and when Skein slipped back to reality the client remained in the scarlet jungle. There was a damage suit over that one, too.

Temporal dislocation plagued him into making poor

guesses. He took on clients whom he could not possibly serve, and wasted his time on them. He turned away people whom he might have been able to help to his own profit. Since he was no longer anchored firmly to his timeline, but drifted in random oscillations of twenty years or more in either direction, he forfeited the keen sense of perspective on which he had previously founded his professional judgments. He grew haggard and lean, also. He passed through a tempest of spiritual doubts that amounted to total submission and then total rejection of faith within the course of four months. He changed lawyers almost weekly. He liquidated assets with invariably catastrophic timing to pay his cascading bills.

A year and a half after the overload, he formally renounced his registration and closed his office. It took six months more to settle the remaining damage suits. Then, with what was left of his money, he bought a spaceliner ticket and set out to search for a world with purple sand and blue-leaved trees, where, unless his fugues had played him false, he might be able to arrange for the repair of his broken mind.

Now the ship has returned to the conventional four-space and dawdles planetward at something rather less than half the speed of light. Across the screens there spreads a necklace of stars; space is crowded here. The captain will point out Abbondanza to anyone who asks: a lemon-colored sun, bigger than that of Earth, surrounded by a dozen bright planetary pips. The passengers are excited. They buzz, twitter, speculate, anticipate. No one is silent except Skein. He is aware of many love affairs; he has had to reject several offers just in the past three days. He has given up reading and is trying to purge his mind of all he has stuffed into it. The fugues have grown worse. He has to write notes to himself, saying things like *You are a passenger aboard a ship heading for Abbondanza VI, and will be landing in a few days, so*

that he does not forget which of his three entangled time-lines is the true one.

Suddenly he is with Nilla on the island in the Gulf of Mexico, getting aboard the little excursion boat. Time stands still here; it could almost be the twentieth century. The frayed, sagging cords of the rigging. The lumpy engine inefficiently converted from internal combustion to turbines. The mustachioed Mexican bandits who will be their guides today. Nilla, nervously coiling her long blonde hair, saying, "Will I get seasick, John? The boat rides right in the water, doesn't it? It won't even hover a little bit?"

"Terribly archaic," Skein says. "That's why we're here."

The captain gestures them aboard. Juan, Francisco, Sebastian. Brothers. *Los hermanos*. Yards of white teeth glistening below the drooping mustaches. With a terrible roar the boat moves away from the dock. Soon the little town of crumbling pastel buildings is out of sight and they are heading jaggedly eastward along the coast, green shoreward water on their left, the blue depths on the right. The morning sun coming up hard. "Could I sunbathe?" Nilla asks. Unsure of herself; he has never seen her this way, so hesitant, so abashed. Mexico has robbed her of her New York assurance. "Go ahead," Skein says. "Why not?" She drops her robe. Underneath she wears only a waist-strap; her heavy breasts look white and vulnerable in the tropic glare, and the small nipples are a faded pink. Skein sprays her with protective sealant and she sprawls out on the deck. *Los hermanos* stare hungrily and talk to each other in low rumbling tones. Not Spanish. Mayan, perhaps? The natives have never learned to adopt the tourists' casual nudity here. Nilla, obviously still uneasy, rolls over and lies face down. Her broad smooth back glistens.

Juan and Francisco yell. Skein follows their pointing

fingers. Porpoises! A dozen of them, frisking around the bow, keeping just ahead of the boat, leaping high and slicing down into the blue water. Nilla gives a little cry of joy and rushes to the side to get a closer look. Throwing her arm selfconsciously across her bare breasts. "You don't need to do that," Skein murmurs. She keeps herself covered. "How lovely they are," she says softly. Sebastian comes up beside them. "*Amigos*," he says. "They are. My friends." The cavorting porpoises eventually disappear. The boat bucks bouncily onward, keeping close to the island's beautiful empty palmy shore. Later they anchor, and he and Nilla swim masked, spying on the coral gardens. When they haul themselves on deck again it is almost noon. The sun is terrible. "Lunch?" Francisco asks. "We make you good lunch now?" Nilla laughs. She is no longer hiding her body. "I'm starved!" she cries.

"We make you good lunch," Francisco says, grinning, and he and Juan go over the side. In the shallow water they are clearly visible near the white sand of the bottom. They have spear-guns; they hold their breaths and prowl. Too late Skein realizes what they are doing. Francisco hauls a fluttering spiny lobster out from behind a rock. Juan impales a huge pale crab. He grabs three conchs also, surfaces, dumps his prey on the deck. Francisco arrives with the lobster. Juan, below again, spears a second lobster. The animals are not dead; they crawl sadly in circles on the deck as they dry. Appalled, Skein turns to Sebastian and says, "Tell them to stop. We're not that hungry." Sebastian, preparing some kind of salad, smiles and shrugs. Francisco has brought up another crab, bigger than the first. "Enough," Skein says. "*Basta! Basta!*" Juan, dripping, tosses down three more conchs. "You pay us good," he says. "We give you good lunch." Skein shakes his head. The deck is becoming a slaughterhouse for ocean life. Sebastian now energetically splits conch shells, extracts the meat, drops it into a

vast bowl to marinate in a yellow-green fluid. "Basta!" Skein yells. Is that the right word in Spanish? He knows it's right in Italian. *Los hermanos* look amused. The sea is full of life, they seem to be telling him. We give you good lunch. Suddenly Francisco erupts from the water, bearing something immense. A turtle! Forty, fifty pounds! The joke has gone too far. "No," Skein says. "Listen, I have to forbid this. Those turtles are almost extinct. Do you understand that? *Muerto. Perdido. Desaparecedo.* I won't eat a turtle. Throw it back. Throw it back." Francisco smiles. He shakes his head. Deftly he binds the turtle's flippers with rope. Juan says, "Not for lunch, *señor*. For us. For to sell. *Mucho dinero.*" Skein can do nothing. Francisco and Sebastian have begun to hack up the crabs and lobsters. Juan slices peppers into the bowl where the conchs are marinating. Pieces of dead animals litter the deck. "Oh, I'm *starving*," Nilla says. Her waist-strap is off too, now. The turtle watches the whole scene, beady-eyed. Skein shudders. Auschwitz, he thinks. Buchenwald. For the animals it's Buchenwald every day.

Purple sand, blue-leaved trees. An orange sea gleaming not far to the west under a lemon sun. "It isn't much farther," the skull-faced man says. "You can make it. Step by step by step is how."

"I'm winded," Skein says. "Those hills—"

"I'm twice your age, and I'm doing fine."

"You're in better shape. I've been cooped up on spaceships for months and months."

"Just a short way on," says the skull-faced man. "About a hundred meters from the shore."

Skein struggles on. The heat is frightful. He has trouble getting a footing in the shifting sand. Twice he trips over black vines whose fleshy runners form a mat a few centimeters under the surface; loops of the vines stick up here and there. He even suffers a brief fugue, a seven-

second flashback to a day in Jerusalem. Somewhere at the core of his mind he is amused by that: a flashback within a flashback. Encapsulated concentric hallucinations. When he comes out of it, he finds himself getting to his feet and brushing sand from his clothing. Ten steps onward the skullfaced man halts him and says, "There it is. Look there, in the pit."

Skein sees a funnel-shaped crater right in front of him, perhaps five meters in diameter at ground level and dwindling to about half that width at its bottom, some six or seven meters down. The pit strikes him as a series of perfect circles making up a truncated cone. Its sides are smooth and firm, almost glazed, and the sand has a brown tinge. In the pit, resting peacefully on the flat floor, is something that looks like a golden amoeba the size of a large cat. A row of round blue-black eyes crosses the hump of its back. From the perimeter of its body comes a soft green radiance.

"Go down to it," the skullfaced man says. "The force of its power falls off with the cube of the distance; from up here you can't feel it. Go down. Let it take you over. Fuse with it. Make communion, Skein, make communion!"

"And will it heal me? So that I'll function as I did before the trouble started?"

"If you let it heal you, it will. That's what it wants to do. It's a completely benign organism. It thrives on repairing broken souls. Let it into your head; let it find the damaged place. You can trust it. Go down."

Skein trembles on the edge of the pit. The creature below flows and eddies, becoming first long and narrow, then high and squat, then resuming its basically circular form. Its color deepens almost to scarlet, and its radiance shifts toward yellow. As if preening and stretching itself. It seems to be waiting for him. It seems eager. This is what he has sought so long, going from planet to wearying planet. The skullfaced man, the purple sand, the pit,

the creature. Skein slips his sandals off. *What have I to lose?* He sits for a moment on the pit's rim; then he shimmies down, sliding part of the way, and lands softly, close beside the being that awaits him. And immediately feels its power.

He enters the huge desolate cavern that is the cathedral of Haghia Sophia. A few Turkish guides lounge hopefully against the vast marble pillars. Tourists shuffle about, reading to each other from cheap plastic guidebooks. A shaft of light enters from some improbable aperture and splinters against the Moslem pulpit. It seems to Skein that he hears the tolling of bells and feels incense prickling at his nostrils. But how can that be? No Christian rites have been performed here in a thousand years. A Turk looms before him. "Show you the mosyics?" he says. *Mosyics.* "Help you understand this marvelous building? A dollar. No? Maybe change money? A good rate. Dollars, marks, Eurocredits, what? You speak English? Show you the mosyics?" The Turk fades. The bells grow louder. A row of bowed priests in white silk robes files past the altar, chanting in—what? Greek? The ceiling is encrusted with gems. Gold plate gleams everywhere. Skein senses the terrible complexity of the cathedral, teeming now with life, a whole universe engulfed in this gloom, a thousand chapels packed with worshippers, long lines waiting to urinate in the crypts, a marketplace in the balcony, jeweled necklaces changing hands with low murmurs of negotiation, babies being born behind the alabaster sarcophagi, the bells tolling, dukes nodding to one another, clouds of incense swirling toward the dome, the figures in the mosaics alive, making the sign of the Cross, smiling, blowing kisses, the pillars moving now, becoming fat-middled as they bend from side to side, the entire colossal structure shifting and flowing and melting. And a ballet of Turks. "Show you the mosyics?" "Change money?" "Postcards? Souvenir of Is-

tanbul?" A plump, pink American face: "You're John Skein, aren't you? The Communicator? We worked together on the big fusion-chamber merger in '53." Skein shakes his head. "It must be that you are mistaken," he says, speaking in Italian. "I am not he. Pardon. Pardon." And joins the line of chanting priests.

Purple sand, blue-leaved trees. An orange sea under a lemon sun. Looking out from the top deck of the terminal, an hour after landing, Skein sees a row of towering hotels rising along the nearby beach. At once he feels the wrongness: there should be no hotels. The right planet has no such towers; therefore this is another of the wrong ones.

He suffers from complete disorientation as he attempts to place himself in sequence. *Where am I?* Aboard a liner heading toward Abbondanza VI. *What do I see?* A world I have previously visited. *Which one?* The one with the hotels. The third out of seven, isn't it?

He has seen this planet before, in flashforwards. Long before he left Earth to begin his quest he glimpsed those hotels, that beach. Now he views it in flashback. That perplexes him. He must try to see himself as a moving point traveling through time, viewing the scenery now from this perspective, now from that.

He watches his earlier self at the terminal. Once it was his future self. How confusing, how needlessly muddling! "I'm looking for an old Earthman," he says. "He must be a hundred, hundred twenty years old. A face like a skull—no flesh at all, really. A brittle man. No? Well, can you tell me, does this planet have a life-form about this big, a kind of blob of golden jelly, that lives in pits down by the seashore, and—No? No? Ask someone else, you say? Of course. And perhaps a hotel room? As long as I've come all this way."

He is getting tired of finding the wrong planets. What folly this is, squandering his last savings on a quest for a

world seen in a dream! He would have expected planets with purple sand and blue-leaved trees to be uncommon, but no, in an infinite universe one can find a dozen of everything, and now he has wasted almost half his money and close to a year, visiting two planets and this one and not finding what he seeks.

He goes to the hotel they arrange for him.

The beach is packed with sunbathers, most of them from Earth. Skein walks among them. "Look," he wants to say, "I have this trouble with my brain, an old injury, and it gives me these visions of myself in the past and future, and one of the visions I see is a place where there's a skullfaced man who takes me to a kind of amoeba in a pit that can heal me, do you follow? And it's a planet with purple sand and blue-leaved trees, just like this one, and I figure if I keep going long enough I'm bound to find it and the skullface and the amoeba, do you follow me? And maybe this is the planet after all, only I'm in the wrong part of it. What should I do? What hope do you think I really have?" This is the third world. He knows that he must visit a number of wrong ones before he finds the right one. But how many? How many? And when will he know that he has the right one?

Standing silent on the beach, he feels confusion come over him, and drops into fugue, and is hurled to another world. Purple sand, blue-leaved trees. A fat, friendly Pingolian consul. "A skullfaced man? No, I can't say I know of any." Which world is this, Skein wonders? One that I have already visited, or one that I have not yet come to? The manifold layers of illusion dazzle him. Past and future and present lie like a knot around his throat. Shifting planes of reality; intersecting films of event. Purple sand, blue-leaved trees. Which planet is this? Which one? Which one? He is back on the crowded beach. A lemon sun. An orange sea. He is back in his cabin on the spaceliner. He sees a note in his own handwriting: *You are a passenger aboard a ship heading for Abbondanza*

VI, and will be landing in a few days. So everything was a vision. Flashback? Flashforward? He is no longer able to tell. He is baffled by these identical worlds. Purple sand. Blue-leaved trees. He wishes he knew how to cry.

- Instead of a client and a consultant for today's communion, Skein has a client and a client. A man and a woman, Michaels and Miss Schumpeter. The communion is of an unusually intimate kind. Michaels has been married six times, and several of the marriages apparently have been dissolved under bitter circumstances. Miss Schumpeter, a woman of some wealth, loves Michaels but doesn't entirely trust him; she wants a peep into his mind before she'll put her thumb to the marital cube. Skein will oblige. The fee has already been credited to his account. Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. If she does not like what she finds in her beloved's soul, there may not be any marriage, but Skein will have been paid.

A tendril of his mind goes to Michaels, now. A tendril to Miss Schumpeter. Skein opens his filters. "Now you'll meet for the first time," he tells them. Michaels flows to her. Miss Schumpeter flows to him. Skein is merely the conduit. Through him pass the ambitions, betrayals, failures, vanities, deteriorations, disputes, treacheries, lusts, generosities, shames, and follies of these two human beings. If he wishes, he can examine the most private sins of Miss Schumpeter and the darkest yearnings of her future husband. But he does not care. He sees such things every day. He takes no pleasure in spying on the psyches of these two. Would a surgeon grow excited over the sight of Miss Schumpeter's Fallopian tubes or Michaels' pancreas? Skein is merely doing his job. He is no voyeur, simply a Communicator. He looks upon himself as a public utility.

When he severs the contact, Miss Schumpeter and Michaels both are weeping.

"I love you!" she wails.

"Get away from me!" he mutters.

Purple sand. Blue-leaved trees. Oily orange sea.

The skull-faced man says, "Won't you ever come to see that causality is merely an illusion, Skein? The notion that there's a consecutive series of events is nothing but a fraud. We impose form on our lives, we talk of time's arrow, we say that there's a flow from A through G and Q to Z, we make believe everything is nicely linear. But it isn't, Skein. It isn't."

"So you keep telling me."

"I feel an obligation to awaken your mind to the truth. G can come before A, and Z before both of them. Most of us don't like to perceive it that way, so we arrange things in what seems like a more logical pattern, just as a novelist will put the motive before the murder and the murder before the arrest. But the universe isn't a novel. We can't make nature imitate art. It's all random, Skein, random, random!"

"Half a million?"

"Half a million."

"You know I don't have that kind of money."

"Let's not waste time, Mr. Coustakis. You have assets. Pledge them as collateral. Credit is easily obtained." Skein waits for the inventor to clear his loan. "Now we can proceed," he says, and tells his desk, "Get Nissenson into a receptive state."

Coustakis says, "First let me get it clear. This man will see everything that's in my mind? He'll get access to my secrets?"

"No. No. I filter the communion with great care. Nothing will pass from your mind to his except the nature of the problem you want him to tackle. Nothing will come back from his mind to yours except the answer."

"And if he doesn't have the answer?"

"He will."

"And if he goes into the transmission business for himself afterward?"

"He's bonded," Skein says curtly. "No chance of it. Let's go, now. Up and together."

"Skein? Skein? Skein? Skein?"

The wind is rising. The sand, blown aloft, stains the sky gray. Skein clammers from the pit and lies by its rim, breathing hard. The skullfaced man helps him get up.

Skein has seen this series of images hundreds of times.

"How do you feel?" the skullfaced man asks.

"Strange. Good. My head seems so clear!"

"You had communion down there?"

"Oh, yes. Yes."

"And?"

"I think I'm healed," Skein says in wonder. "My strength is back. Before, you know, I felt cut down to the bone, a minimum version of myself. And now. And now." He lets a tendril of consciousness slip forth. It meets the mind of the skullfaced man. Skein is aware of a glassy interface; he can touch the other mind, but he cannot enter it. "Are you a Communicator too?" Skein asks, awed.

"In a sense. I feel you touching me. You're better, aren't you?"

"Much. Much. Much."

"As I told you. Now you have your second chance, Skein. Your gift has been restored. Courtesy of our friend in the pit. They love being helpful."

"Skein? Skein? Skein? Skein?"

We conceive of time either as flowing or as enduring. The problem is how to reconcile these concepts. From a purely formalistic point of view there exists no difficulty,

as these properties can be reconciled by means of the concept of a *duratio successiva*. Every unit of time measure has this characteristic of a flowing permanence: an hour streams by while it lasts and so long as it lasts. Its flowing is thus identical with its duration. Time, from this point of view, is transitory; but its passing away lasts.

In the early months of his affliction he experienced a great many scenes of flashforward while in fugue. He saw himself outside the nineteenth-century mansion, he saw himself in a dozen lawyers' offices, he saw himself in hotels, terminals, spaceliners, he saw himself discussing the nature of time with the skullfaced man, he saw himself trembling on the edge of the pit, he saw himself emerging healed, he saw himself wandering from world to world, looking for the right one with purple sand and blue-leaved trees. As time unfolded most of these flashforwards duly entered the flow of the present; he *did* come to the mansion, he *did* go to those hotels and terminals, he *did* wander those useless worlds. Now, as he approaches Abbondanza VI, he goes through a great many flashbacks and a relatively few flashforwards, and the flashforwards seem to be limited to a fairly narrow span of time, covering his landing on Abbondanza VI, his first meeting with the skullfaced man, his journey to the pit, and his emergence, healed, from the amoeba's lair. Never anything beyond that final scene. He wonders if time is going to run out for him on Abbondanza VI.

The ship lands on Abbondanza VI half a day ahead of schedule. There are the usual decontamination procedures to endure, and while they are going on Skein rests in his cabin, counting minutes to liberty. He is curiously confident that this will be the world on which he finds the skullfaced man and the benign amoeba. Of course, he has felt that way before, looking out from other spaceliners at other planets of the proper coloration, and he has

been wrong. But the intensity of his confidence is something new. He is sure that the end of his quest lies here.

"Debarkation beginning now," the loudspeakers say.

He joins the line of outgoing passengers. The others smile, embrace, whisper; they have found friends or even mates on this voyage. He remains apart. No one says goodbye to him. He emerges into a brightly lit terminal, a great cube of glass that looks like all the other terminals scattered across the thousands of worlds that man has reached. He could be in Chicago or Johannesburg or Beirut: the scene is one of porters, reservations clerks, customs officials, hotel agents, taxi drivers, guides. A blight of sameness spreading across the universe. Stumbling through the customs gate, Skein finds himself set upon. Does he want a taxi, a hotel room, a woman, a man, a guide, a homestead plot, a servant, a ticket to *Abbondanza VII*, a private car, an interpreter, a bank, a telephone? The hubbub jolts Skein into three consecutive ten-second fugues, all flashbacks; he sees a rainy day in *Tierra del Fuego*, he conducts a communion to help a maker of sky-spectacles perfect the plot of his latest extravaganza, and he puts his palm to a cube in order to dictate contract terms to *Nicholas Coustakis*. Then *Coustakis* fades, the terminal reappears, and Skein realizes that someone has seized him by the left arm just above the elbow. Bony fingers dig painfully into his flesh. It is the skull-faced man. "Come with me," he says. "I'll take you where you want to go."

"This isn't just another flashforward, is it?" Skein asks, as he has watched himself ask so many times in the past. "I mean, you're really here to get me."

The skull-faced man says, as Skein has heard him say so many times in the past, "No, this time it's no flashforward. I'm really here to get you."

"Thank God. Thank God. Thank God."

"Follow along this way. You have your passport handy?"

The familiar words. Skein is prepared to discover he is merely in fugue, and expects to drop back into frustrating reality at any moment. But no. The scene does not waver. It holds firm. It holds. At last he has caught up with this particular scene, overtaking it and enclosing it, pearl-like, in the folds of the present. He is on the way out of the terminal. The skullfaced man helps him through the formalities. How withered he is! How fiery the eyes, how gaunt the face! Those frightening orbits of bone jutting through the skin of the forehead. That parched cheek. Skein listens for a dry rattle of ribs. One sturdy punch and there would be nothing left but a cloud of white dust, slowly settling.

"I know your difficulty," the skullfaced man says. "You've been caught in entropy's jaws. You're being devoured. The injury to your mind—it's tipped you into a situation you aren't able to handle. You *could* handle it, if you'd only learn to adapt to the nature of the perceptions you're getting now. But you won't do that, will you? And you want to be healed. Well, you can be healed here, all right. More or less healed. I'll take you to the place."

"What do you mean, I could handle it, if I'd only learn to adapt?"

"Your injury has liberated you. It's shown you the truth about time. But you refuse to see it."

"What truth?" Skein asks flatly.

"You still try to think that time flows neatly from alpha to omega, from yesterday through today to tomorrow," the skullfaced man says, as they walk slowly through the terminal. "But it doesn't. The idea of the forward flow of time is a deception we impose on ourselves in childhood. An abstraction, agreed upon by common convention, to make it easier for us to cope with phenomena. The truth is that events are random, that chronological flow is only our joint hallucination,

that if time can be said to flow at all, it flows in all 'directions' at once. Therefore—"

"Wait," Skein says. "How do you explain the laws of thermodynamics? Entropy increases; available energy constantly diminishes; the universe heads toward ultimate stasis."

"Does it?"

"The second law of thermodynamics—"

"Is an abstraction," the skull-faced man says, "which unfortunately fails to correspond with the situation in the true universe. It isn't a divine law. It's a mathematical hypothesis developed by men who weren't able to perceive the real situation. They did their best to account for the data within a framework they could understand. Their laws are formulations of probability, based on conditions that hold within closed systems, and given the right closed system the second law is useful and illuminating. But in the universe as a whole it simply isn't true. There *is* no arrow of time. Entropy does *not* necessarily increase. Natural processes *can* be reversible. Causes do *not* invariably precede effects. In fact, the concepts of cause and effect are empty. There are neither causes nor effects, but only events, spontaneously generated, which we arrange in our minds in comprehensible patterns of sequence."

"No," Skein mutters. "This is insanity!"

"There are no patterns. Everything is random."

"No."

"Why not admit it? Your brain has been injured; what was destroyed was the center of temporal perception, the node that humans use to impose this unreal order on events. Your time-filter has burned out. The past and the future are as accessible to you as the present, Skein: you can go where you like, you can watch events drifting past as they really do. Only you haven't been able to break up your old habits of thought. You still try to im-

pose the conventional entropic order on things, even though you lack the mechanism to do it, now, and the conflict between what you perceive and what you think you perceive is driving you crazy. Eh?"

"How do you know so much about me?"

The skull-faced man chuckles. "I was injured in the same way as you. I was cut free from the time-line long ago, through the kind of overload you suffered. And I've had years to come to terms with the new reality. I was as terrified as you were, at first. But now I understand. I move about freely. I know things, Skein." A rasping laugh. "You need rest, though. A room, a bed. Time to think things over. Come. There's no rush now. You're on the right planet; you'll be all right soon."

Further, the association of entropy increase with time's arrow is in no sense circular; rather, it both tells us something about what will happen to natural systems in time, and about what the time order must be for a series of states of a system. Thus, we may often establish a time order among a set of events by use of the time-entropy association, free from any reference to clocks and magnitudes of time intervals from the present. In actual judgments of before-after we frequently do this on the basis of our experience (even though without any explicit knowledge of the law of entropy increase): we know, for example, that for iron in air the state of pure metal must have been before that of a rusted surface, or that the clothes will be dry after, not before, they have hung in the hot sun.

A tense, humid night of thunder and temporal storms. Lying alone in his oversized hotel room, five kilometers from the purple shore, Skein suffers fiercely from fugue.

"Listen, I have to forbid this. Those turtles are almost extinct. Do you understand that? *Muerto. Perdido. Desa-*

parecedo. I won't eat a turtle. Throw it back. Throw it back."

"I'm happy to say your second go-round has been approved, Mr. Skein. Not that there was ever any doubt. A long and happy new life to you, sir."

"Go down to it. The force of its power falls off with the cube of the distance; from up here you can't feel it. Go down. Let it take you over. Fuse with it. Make communion, Skein, make communion!"

"Show you the mosyics? Help you understand this marvelous building? A dollar. No? Maybe change money? A good rate."

"First let me get it clear. This man will see everything that's in my mind? He'll get access to my secrets?"

"I love you."

"Get away from me!"

"Won't you ever come to see that causality is merely an illusion, Skein? The notion that there's a consecutive series of events is nothing but a fraud. We impose form on our lives, we talk of time's arrow, we say that there's a flow from A through G and Q to Z, we make believe everything is nicely linear. But it isn't, Skein. It isn't."

Breakfast on a leafy veranda. Morning light out of the west, making the trees glow with an ultramarine glitter. The skull-faced man joins him. Skein secretly searches the parched face. Is everything an illusion? Perhaps he is an illusion.

They walk toward the sea. Well before noon they reach the shore. The skull-faced man points to the south, and they follow the coast; it is often a difficult hike, for

in places the sand is washed out and they must detour inland, scrambling over quartzy cliffs. The monstrous old man is indefatigable. When they pause to rest, squatting on a timeless purple strand made smooth by the recent tide, the debate about time resumes, and Skein hears words that have been echoing in his skull for four years and more. It is as though everything up till now has been a rehearsal for a play, and now at last he has taken the stage.

“Won’t you ever come to see that causality is merely an illusion, Skein?”

“I feel an obligation to awaken your mind to the truth.”

“Time is an ocean, and events come drifting to us as randomly as dead animals on the waves.”

Skein offers all the proper cues.

“I won’t accept that! It’s a demonic, chaotic, nihilistic theory.”

“You can say that after all you’ve experienced?”

“I’ll go on saying it. What I’ve been going through is a mental illness. Maybe I’m deranged, but the universe isn’t.”

“Contrary. You’ve only recently become sane and started to see things as they really are. The trouble is that you don’t want to admit the evidence you’ve begun to perceive. Your filters are down, Skein! You’ve shaken free of the illusion of linearity! Now’s your chance to show your resilience. Learn to live with the real reality. Stop this silly business of imposing an artificial order on the flow of time. Why *should* effect follow cause? Why *shouldn’t* the seed follow the tree? Why must you persist in holding tight to a useless, outworn, contemptible system of false evaluations of experience when you’ve managed to break free of the—”

“Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!”

By early afternoon they are many kilometers from the

hotel, still keeping as close to the shore as they can. The terrain is uneven and divided, with rugged fingers of rock running almost to the water's edge, and Skein finds the journey even more exhausting than it had seemed in his visions of it. Several times he stops, panting, and has to be urged to go on.

"It isn't much farther," the skullfaced man says. "You can make it. Step by step is how."

"I'm winded. Those hills—"

"I'm twice your age, and I'm doing fine."

"You're in better shape. I've been cooped up on spaceships for months and months."

"Just a short way on," says the skullfaced man. "About a hundred meters from the shore."

Skein struggles on. The heat is frightful. He trips in the sand; he is blinded by sweat; he has a momentary flashback fugue. "There it is," the skullfaced man says, finally. "Look there, in the pit."

Skein beholds the conical crater. He sees the golden amoeba.

"Go down to it," the skullfaced man says. "The force of its power falls off with the cube of the distance; from up here you can't feel it. Go down. Let it take you over. Fuse with it. Make communion, Skein, make communion!"

"And will it heal me? So that I'll function as I did before the trouble started?"

"If you let it heal you, it will. That's what it wants to do. It's a completely benign organism. It thrives on repairing broken souls. Let it into your head; let it find the damaged place. You can trust it. Go down."

Skein trembles on the edge of the pit. The creature below flows and eddies, becoming first long and narrow, then high and squat, then resuming its basically circular form. Its color deepens almost to scarlet, and its radiance shifts toward yellow. As if preening and stretching itself. It seems to be waiting for him. It seems eager. This is

what he has sought so long, going from planet to wearying planet. The skull-faced man, the purple sand, the pit, the creature. Skein slips his sandals off. *What have I to lose?* He sits for a moment on the pit's rim; then he shimmies down, sliding part of the way, and lands softly, close beside the being that awaits him. And immediately feels its power. Something brushes against his brain. The sensation reminds him of the training sessions of his first go-round, when the instructors were showing him how to develop his gift. The fingers probing his consciousness. Go on, enter, he tells them. I'm open. I'm open. And he finds himself in contact with the being of the pit. Wordless. A two-way flow of unintelligible images is the only communion; shapes drift from and into his mind. The universe blurs. He is no longer sure where the center of his ego lies. He has thought of his brain as a sphere with himself at its center, but now it seems extended, elliptical, and an ellipse has no center, only a pair of foci, here and here, one focus in his own skull and one—where?—within that fleshy amoeba. And suddenly he is looking at himself through the amoeba's eyes. The large biped with the bony body. How strange, how grotesque! Yet it suffers. Yet it must be helped. It is injured. It is broken. We go to it with all our love. We will heal. And Skein feels something flowing over the bare folds and fissures of his brain. But he can no longer remember whether he is the human or the alien, the bony one or the boneless. Their identities have mingled. He goes through fugues by the scores, seeing yesterdays and tomorrows, and everything is formless and without content; he is unable to recognize himself or to understand the words being spoken. It does not matter. All is random. All is illusion. Release the knot of pain you clutch within you. Accept. Accept. Accept. Accept.

He accepts.

He releases.

He merges.

He casts away the shreds of ego, the constricting exoskeleton of self, and placidly permits the necessary adjustments to be made.

The possibility, however, of genuine thermodynamic entropy decrease for an isolated system—no matter how rare—does raise an objection to the definition of time's direction in terms of entropy. If a large, isolated system did by chance go through an entropy decrease as one state evolved from another, we would have to say that time "went backward" if our definition of time's arrow were basically in terms of entropy increase. But with an ultimate definition of the forward direction of time in terms of the actual occurrence of states, and measured time intervals from the present, we can readily accommodate the entropy decrease; it would become merely a rare anomaly in the physical processes of the natural world.

The wind is rising. The sand, blown aloft, stains the sky gray. Skein clammers from the pit and lies by its rim, breathing hard. The skullfaced man helps him get up.

Skein has seen this series of images hundreds of times.

"How do you feel?" the skullfaced man asks.

"Strange. Good. My head seems to clear!"

"You had communion down there?"

"Oh, yes. Yes."

"And?"

"I think I'm healed," Skein says in wonder. "My strength is back. Before, you know, I felt cut down to the bone, a minimum version of myself. And now. And now." He lets a tendril of consciousness slip forth. It meets the mind of the skullfaced man. Skein is aware of a glassy interface; he can touch the other mind, but he cannot enter it. "Are you a Communicator too?" Skein asks, awed.

"In a sense. I feel you touching me. You're better, aren't you?"

"Much. Much. Much."

"As I told you. Now you have your second chance, Skein. Your gift has been restored. Courtesy of our friend in the pit. They love being helpful."

"What shall I do now? Where shall I go?"

"Anything. Anywhere. Anywhen. You're free to move along the time-line as you please. In a state of controlled, directed fugue, so to speak. After all, if time is random, if there is no rigid sequence of events—"

"Yes."

"Then why not choose the sequence that appeals to you? Why stick to the set of abstractions your former self has handed you? You're a free man, Skein. Go. Enjoy. Undo your past. Edit it. Improve on it. It isn't your past, any more than this is your present. It's all one, Skein, all *one*. Pick the segment you prefer."

He tests the truth of the skull-faced man's words. Cautiously Skein steps three minutes into the past and sees himself struggling up out of the pit. He slides four minutes into the future and sees the skull-faced man, alone, trudging northward along the shore. Everything flows. All is fluidity. He is free. He is free.

"You see, Skein?"

"Now I do," Skein says. He is out of entropy's jaws. He is time's master, which is to say he is his own master. He can move at will. He can defy the imaginary forces of determinism. Suddenly he realizes what he must do now. He will assert his free will; he will challenge entropy on its home ground. Skein smiles. He cuts free of the time-line and floats easily into what others would call the past.

"Get Nissenson into a receptive state," he orders his desk.

Coustakis, blinking rapidly, obviously uneasy, says,

"First let me get it clear. This man will see everything that's in my mind? He'll get access to my secrets?"

"No. No. I filter the communion with great care. Nothing will pass from your mind to his except the nature of the problem you want him to tackle. Nothing will come back from his mind to yours except the answer."

"And if he doesn't have the answer?"

"He will."

"And if he goes into the transmission business for himself afterward?" Coustakis asks.

"He's bonded," Skein says curtly. "No chance of it. Let's go, now. Up and together."

The desk reports that Nissenson, half the world away in Sao Paulo, is ready. Quickly Skein throws Coustakis into the receptive condition, and swings around to face the brilliant lights of his data-access units. Here is the moment when he can halt the transaction. Turn again, Skein. Face Coustakis, smile sadly, inform him that the communion will be impossible. Give him back his money, send him off to break some other Communicator's mind. And live on, whole and happy, ever after. It was at this point, visiting this scene endlessly in his fugues, that Skein silently and hopelessly cried out to himself to stop. Now it is within his power, for this is no fugue, no illusion of time-shift. He has shifted. He is here, carrying with him the knowledge of all that is to come, and he is the only Skein on the scene, the operative Skein. Get up, now. Refuse the contract.

He does not. Thus he defies entropy. Thus he breaks the chain.

He peers into the sparkling, shifting little blazes until they kindle his gift, jabbing at the electrical rhythms of his brain until he is lifted into the energy level that permits the opening of a communion. He starts to go up. He reaches forth one tendril of his mind and engages Nissenson. With another tendril he snares Coustakis. Steadily,

now, he draws the two tendrils together. He is aware of the risks, but believes he can surmount them.

The tendrils meet.

Out of Coustakis' mind flows a description of the matter-transmitter and a clear statement of the beam-spread problem; Skein shoves it along to Nissenson, who begins to work on a solution. The combined strength of the two minds is great, but Skein deftly lets the excess charge bleed away, and maintains the communion with no particular effort, holding Coustakis and Nissenson together while they deal with their technical matters. Skein pays little attention as their excited minds rush toward answers. *If you. Yes, and then. But if. I see, yes, I could. And. However, maybe I should. I like that. It leads to. Of course. The inevitable result. Is it feasible, though? I think so. You might have to. I could. Yes. I could. I could.*

"I thank you a million times," Coustakis says to Skein. "It was all so simple, once we saw how we ought to look at it. I don't begrudge your fee at all. Not at all."

Coustakis leaves, glowing with delight. Skein, relieved, tells his desk, "I'm going to allow myself a three-day holiday. Fix the schedule to move everybody up accordingly."

He smiles. He strides across his office, turning up the amplifiers, treating himself to the magnificent view. The nightmare undone. The past revised. The burnout avoided. All it took was confidence. Enlightenment. A proper understanding of the processes involved.

He feels the sudden swooping sensations of incipient temporal fugue. Before he can intervene to regain control, he swings off into darkness and arrives instantaneously on a planet of purple sand and blue-leaved trees. Orange waves lap at the shore. He stands a few meters from a deep conical pit. Peering into it, he sees an amoeba-like creature lying beside a human figure; strands

of the alien's jellylike substance are wound around the man's body. He recognizes the man to be John Skein. The communion in the pit ends; the man begins to clamber from the pit. The wind is rising. The sand, blown aloft, stains the sky gray. Patiently he watches his younger self struggling up from the pit. Now he understands. The circuit is closed; the knot is tied; the identity loop is complete. He is destined to spend many years on Abbondanza VI, growing ancient and withered. He is the skullfaced man.

Skein reaches the rim of the pit and lies there, breathing hard. He helps Skein get up.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

*We began with a journey in search of a lie. We end with
a return to . . . truth?*

REUNION

Arthur Clarke

People of Earth, do not be afraid. We come in peace—and why not? For we are your cousins; we have been here before.

You will recognize us when we meet, a few hours from now. We are approaching the Solar System almost as swiftly as this radio message; already, your sun dominates the sky ahead of us. It is the sun our ancestors, and yours, shared ten million years ago. For we are men, as you are; but you have forgotten your history, while we have remembered ours.

We colonized Earth, in the reign of the great reptiles, who were dying when we came and whom we could not save. Your world was a tropical planet then, and we felt that it would make a fair home for our people. We were wrong; though we were maters of space, we knew so little then about climate, about evolution, about genetics. . . .

For millions of summers—there were no winters in those ancient days—the colony flourished. Isolated though it had to be, in a universe where the journey from one star to the next takes years, it kept in touch with its parent civilization. Three or four times in every century, starships would call and bring news of the Galaxy.

Then, two million years ago, Earth began to change.

For ages it had been a tropical paradise; now the temperature fell, and the ice began to creep down from the poles. And as the climate altered, so did the colonists. We realize now that it was a natural adaptation to the end of the long summer, but those who had made Earth their home for so many generations believed that they had been attacked by a strange and repulsive disease. A disease which did not kill, which did not physical harm—but merely disfigured.

Yet some were immune; the change spared them and their children. And so, within a few thousand years, the colony had split into two separate groups—almost two separate species—suspicious and jealous of each other.

The division brought envy, discord, and ultimately, conflict. As the colony disintegrated and the climate steadily worsened, those who could do so withdrew from Earth. The rest sank into barbarism.

We could have kept in touch, but there is so much to do in a universe of a hundred thousand million stars. Until a few years ago, we did not know that any of you had survived; then we picked up your first radio signals, learned your simple languages, and discovered that you had made the long climb back from savagery. We come to greet you, our long-lost relatives—and to help you.

We have discovered much in the aeons since we abandoned Earth. If you wish us to bring back the eternal summer that ruled before the Ice Ages, we can do so. But above all, we have a simple remedy for the offensive yet harmless genetic plague that afflicted so many of the colonists.

Perhaps it has run its course—but if not, we have good news for you. People of Earth, you can rejoin the society of the universe without shame, without embarrassment.

If any of you are still white, we can cure you.

Notes from *Infinity* . . .

Poul Anderson is a) immortal; b) wears heavy makeup; c) a teenager masquerading as a grown man. Choose one: envy counts. He is married to Karen, who writes accomplished poetry and too infrequently stories of her own. Occasionally they collaborate, proving that in the admixture of separately extraordinary talents, the sum CAN be greater than the parts.

Russell L. Bates is the only Amerind (full-blooded Kiowa) member of the Science Fiction Writers of America, and perhaps the only Indian writing science fiction. Aimed early but unwillingly at a degree in Aeronautical Engineering, that proved out a disaster which was followed by four years in the Air Force (Missiles). A duty accident led to six months in the hospital and writing encouraged as therapy; that led to the Open Door TV/Movie writing classes in Los Angeles, from which experience he wrote an Indian science-fantasy accepted by *The Name of the Game* (not yet performed.) That led to the 1969 session of the Clarion S-F Writers' Workshop, which led to a number of sales and the firm establishment of a professional career.

J. F. Bone, a familiar name to s-f readers for many years, is a Professor of Veterinarian Medicine at Oregon

State University. He has been absent from the scene for the past several years due to intensified professoring, both here and abroad. *The Scents of IT* is his first new story in three years, and marks a welcome return.

Ed Bryant, by upbringing, should be either a cowboy or an instructor of English at a small sectarian college. After receiving advanced degrees in English, he decided that the latter life was unappealing, so he went to the Clarion Workshop for the 1968 session, following which he sold his first story to Harlan Ellison's *Again Dangerous Visions*. A repeat of Clarion in 1969, following a part-time year in a stirrup buckle factory while he wrote and gathered the usual bouquets of rejection slips, taught him more about the craft (as opposed to the art) of writing, and he has since been making it very well indeed as a full-time writer, with more than twenty sales. In 1965 he was the very picture of an establishment-student, complete to blazer, striped tie and being Rush Coordinator for the fraternity system of his campus; he was also dissatisfied with the world. In 1971, he has managed to remain single, drives a sportscar, has long hair and dresses freakily . . . and is still dissatisfied with the world.

Arthur C. Clarke, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells together are the three most important and influential writers of modern science fiction, Clarke being the only currently active writer to be so recognized. After a number of years spent on nonfiction projects, and the classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*, he has recently (and happily) returned to the production of short stories.

Michael Fayette is the youngest contributor to the *Infinity* series; his *The Man on the Hill* in *Infinity One* marked his first professional sale. Presently a college student, he is continuing evidence that s-f will never have to worry about the development of new talent.

James E. Gunn is Public Relations Officer for the University of Missouri, a full-time career which leaves him little time for writing, except during the summer months. Thus there are all too few stories coming from him these years. He has written a number of classics, including the novel *The Immortals*, which was the basis for the currently running ABC Television series.

Robert Hoskins, editor of the *Infinity* series, is also general editor of the Lancer science fiction program. He has written a number of novels and several score short stories, but is better known as a science fiction anthologist. *First Step Outward*, (Dell), and *The Stars Around Us* and *Swords Against Tomorrow* (NAL), have already been published. Other projects are in various stages of completion and work-in-progress, and will be forthcoming.

Howard L. Myers is a quiet southerner who published a few stories in the s-f magazines about twenty years ago, then gave up fiction to work as reporter and later an editorial writer for the Winston-Salem newspapers. A few years ago he began reappearing in the magazines, first as Verge Foray, and now as himself; the Foray identity will be permitted to wither away. A Masters degree in music from the University of North Carolina would seem to have little to do with s-f, but in quieter moments he plays the viola in a couple of local symphony orchestras.

William F. Nolan has published some twenty books as of this writing, of which eight are science fiction (and *Logan's Run* the most famous; it was the first s-f novel to achieve a six-figure movie rights sale). He has been involved in s-f since 1952 as novelist, anthologist and enthusiast. Five of his s-f shorts have appeared in *Playboy*, a record envied by all other writers in the field (excepting those few who have had six).

K. M. O'Donnell is the science fiction *persona* otherwise known as Barry Malzberg (whose first two serious novels, *Screen* and *Oracle of the Thousand Hands*, were well received by the *New York Times*; the first has been optioned for the movies, and sold to a number of foreign countries. The second has just achieved its first foreign sale.) Malzberg tried to kill off O'Donnell some time ago, but editors refused to let him die. His s-f novels include *The Empty People* (Lancer), which has also been optioned for movie production, and two not yet published at this writing, *Universe Day* (Avon) and *Dwellers of the Deep* (Ace).

Robert Silverberg is the very model of what every writer should be. He approaches his craft with an intense personal discipline, and regularly produces works of astonishing brilliance. A professional since college days, he is also noted—and notorious—for his semi-annual efforts as a pusher of kittens, to the extent that the special breed of Silverberg Siamese threatens to become dominant over the cat population of New York City.

Anthon Warden, a willing/unwilling resident of New York City, is somewhere past his thirtieth birthday and thus suspect in the eyes of the New People of the world. He has been known to carry on violent political arguments with himself, and with those unfortunate enough to be considered by him as friends. *Timesprawl* marks his first appearance in public.

A final note of appreciation must be expressed to the Clarion Science Fiction Writers' Workshop, and to its founder and guiding light, Robin Scott Wilson. Accepting a strictly limited group of about twenty students each summer, Professor Wilson showed his pupils the map that points the way to professionalism in writing. Aided by guest professional writers, who come in for a

week or a weekend of lecturing, bullying, praising, and rapping, the Workshop has scored an amazingly high percentage of successes. Three of the writers represented in the present volume are Clarion alumni. At Clarion, while their talent was carefully nurtured, they learned the secret of discipline—which, with a leavening measure of innate talent, is the only secret a writer needs to know.

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